A GRIM HOUSE PUBLISHING ANTHOLOGY

FORGOTTEN LORE

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THE MAN WITH NO NAME

ATOINE BANDELE

Everything about him was perfect.

He danced like a leopard, and sang like a nightingale. Though sweat dripped down his muscles, he smelled as fresh as fruit. He was well-mannered and considerate to man, woman, and child alike. Everyone loved him. And that laugh! So infectious. It lit up the surrounding space, casting a perfect aura around his head. This man truly had no flaws.

Yet Imani did not know what he looked like, nor did she know his name.

It had been several hours since the festival had begun. The village celebrated a visiting nation—the Ya-Seti, if Imani had heard the soldiers correctly. She'd lost all sense of time. It felt like only a few moments since she had sneaked away from home, slipping out her window, her mother and father none the wiser. Imani thought she had woken them when she crushed the bean plants underfoot. She had cursed at herself, tiptoeing around the other plants as she walked the never-ending farmland.

Imani had never been to the Great Village of Bajok, at least never to its central festival grounds. Her father only let her go to the outskirts to trade their harvest every so often.

"No need to intermingle with this sort," her father had said one day at the market. "This village is becoming more and more … ambitious. Look at that hut there; it's twice, no, three times as big as ours. What's the need for it?"

It didn't matter to Imani. All she cared about was what the village would have in store for *her*. The Great Village stood atop a small plateau, surrounded by a mud wall five times as tall as a man stood. Her father was right—the huts were grand, even more so at the village's central grounds. Some of the huts stacked one on top of the other, rising high. The Great Village dwarfed her family's farm at least ten times over.

The festival's sights and sounds overtook Imani. There was a drum circle, in which men fought while holding hands in some strange ritual. Their faces were bloody from the combat. Women laughed as they twisted and turned to the beat of the drums. They all wore long blue skirts with white tops.

Imani knew their tops represented the glow of the two moons and that the blue bottoms signified the rivers and oceans. As the women danced, they looked like tiny moons shifting the waters of the world.

The villagers were beautiful, all of them. It seemed like they all had eyes of golden brown, and their skin was flawless. Perhaps it was the energy in the village that made them so beautiful. Each woman wore a wide smile, and the men's laughter was alluring.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" her friend said when she found Imani in the throng of villagers. Like Imani, Yejide wore a blue skirt with a white top.

"It doesn't look this big from the markets." Imani didn't want to take her eyes off any of it, but the sight of Yejide's teeth made her wince. "Did you use the licorice root like I told you to?"

Yejide stopped smiling, covering her mouth. "I was so excited I forgot."

"Here, take this." Imani offered Yejide her own root from her skirt.

"Thanks," Yejide said as she cleaned her teeth. White teeth didn't matter much out in the farmlands—at least, not most of the time. It was an honest mistake. But if Imani were to blend in with the villagers, she couldn't have her friend walking about with yellowed teeth.

A man in a large mask pounded the ground in front of Imani as Yejide used the root discreetly. At first, the man stomped slowly. Imani scrunched up her face as though she smelled a nasty odor. She'd had many suitors before, and no man had yet impressed her. But something about the way this man moved caught her attention. He rolled his hips in a rhythmic circle. The reflection of the festival fires flickered atop his chest as he held out a hand. Imani could not take her eyes off that gyration; it was … hypnotic.

"Thank you," Yejide cut in. "But we are dancing together."

In truth, neither of them had been dancing. Yejide tried a simple two-step to sell her lie, but that did not deter the man. Nor did it deter Imani.

Imani took the man's hand and mimicked his tempo. They danced atop the soft ground. Imani's heart pounded under her breast, and her breath quickened, though from the dancing or from the man, she couldn't decide.

Yejide would not be left out and went to find a man of her own, pulling an eager participant from the crowd. She and her new partner danced in circles around one another. But Imani took no notice, her attention locked on her own cohort.

"Feel the rhythm of the sister spirits. Let your arms take up your skirt and move them like the moons shift the waters," the man said.

Imani lifted her blue skirt; she at least got that part right. The custom of these festivals was to wear such things. Yejide did the same with her partner, mimicking Imani. Both did their best not to attract the wrong attention. A pair of farm girls had to look like regular villagers.

But Imani couldn't get the dance right. Her partner, however, was perfect. His moves represented the spirits of the earth. He stomped the ground as though to call the elemental spirit Himself. Imani watched him, letting the man's own dancing spirit fill her.

"That's it. Relax. Follow the drums; they will guide your feet." He gave her a full smile—it was all she could see through the hole of his ceremonial mask. His teeth were straight and as white as the moons. Imani hopped and skipped like the waves of the ocean.

"You see that? You're a natural." The man stomped his feet again. Thump, thump. "Now turn around me."

Imani did as he asked. Like the other women, she twisted around him like water crashing around a rock. The singers in the drum circle sang their hymn.

> This is Esowon; this is Esowon.
> Water over rocks, this is how it starts.
> Water's the hands of the painter.
> Rock's the canvas of the artist.

"You're not from the village, are you?" The man turned on his heel and clapped twice.

"That obvious?" Imani's cheeks went red.

He shrugged while holding the tempo of the drums. Imani bit her lip; he never missed a beat.

"Strictly, I'm of Bajok, but I serve as a farmhand."

"Your beauty is wasted on the beans," the man said, voice muffled by his mask.

Imani blushed. She turned away, feeling silly. What had come over her?

"You don't have to be bashful." The man pulled her chin back up with his finger. His touch was gentle. "Come, drink with me."

The man guided Imani by the small of her back. Yejide looked over her partner's shoulder, keeping a close eye on Imani. When Imani met her

friend's eyes, the stupor she'd felt during the dance left her.

"Wait, I can't," she said. "My friend—"

"Can join us if she likes." The man flashed a smile. He waved a hand at Yejide and her dancing partner. Yejide waved her skinny arm back, beaming as she skipped toward them.

"I was offering your friend a drink if you wanted to join—"

"We'd love to! Right?" Yejide turned a hawk-like gaze toward her partner, who shrugged.

The group drifted from the drum circle, where others still danced, kicking up the soft dirt in a whirlwind. To Imani, the dust clouds and the fluttering blue dresses reminded her of the stories her mother had told her.

"*This is how the world was created by the Gods,"* her mother had told a young Imani while dancing at their farm. Her movements had been like magic.

As they moved toward the drinks, the man kept the beat of the drum with his steps. When they approached the jugs of wine, his sweat had already dried.

"Have you had our palm wine before?" He grabbed a jug.

"My father only lets me have some on our first harvest." Imani clutched her wrist. Why was she so nervous?

"You can have as much as you'd like here." He turned to the man watching over the wine. "Isn't that right, friend?"

"Fine by me. The Chief says we can drink our fill today," the wine man said, swaying dizzily. He'd already had his own taste.

Yejide was slow to drink, but her partner took a generous swig from the large jug.

"It's so … sour," Yejide said with pinched eyes.

Imani drank as much as she could until it burned her throat. "What is all this?" She pointed toward the festivities.

"You see there?" The man nodded toward the far end of the festival grounds. "That's our Great-Chief and the Kor of Ya-Seti."

"The Kor?" Imani tried to follow the man's gaze.

"The ruler of the Ya-Seti. And the Kor'de is his ruling-wife. They come far from the east, almost to the Sapphire Seas."

That's a long way to travel, Imani thought. Through the mass of the villagers' waving hands and turning bodies, she found where the royal men sat. The Great-Chief was there, wearing his ceremonial mask of war.

She'd never seen him so close before. He was the primary reason for their prosperity. He was tall and broad-shouldered, a warrior through and through, the strongest of all the men in their village.

Next to him sat an impossibly old-looking man. His skin was wizened beyond belief, hair grayer than a sheep's. Yet he wore a golden crown twice as tall as his head, and glistening around its brim were two silver snakes. A gold sash sat atop the elaborate white silks that stretched from his torso down to his heels.

Next to the pair were two war elephants, also decked in gold. One had gold chains falling from its tusks; the other, an entirely gold mask. Each elephant carried a cart on its back, in which a trio of archers was perched.

"I didn't know there was so much gold in the entire world," Yejide said, her mouth wide in disbelief.

"It's a big show, really. They want to make a good impression on the Chief. And we want to make a good impression on them—is the drink too sour? I can get you another." The man pointed at Imani's drink. She blushed and took another sip. Already her skin tingled from the wine.

"You see, they want to marry off their daughter to the Great-Chief's first son. This is all a show of respect."

Imani looked at the young woman sitting next to the visiting Kor. She was gorgeous with her long neck and smooth skin. Like her father, she wore long white silks, but her head was draped with a silver headpiece.

"She's the bride to be, I assume?" Imani nodded to the woman. "She's beautiful."

"For a Ya-Seti. The best women are right here in Bajok."

Imani blushed again—she needed to stop doing that. Yejide was looking at her with raised eyebrows.

Before Imani could give her friend a look back, a small girl brushed against her leg. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" Imani knelt.

"The boys won't let me play with them," the girl sobbed.

"Don't worry; we'll play with you," the man said before Imani could respond.

He swung the small girl atop his shoulders and danced again. The girl squealed with joy, holding on to the man's mask.

Imani smiled. Watching him dance with the girl warmed her heart. Something unnatural within her made her want to join him. She downed

the rest of her wine and trotted up to them, taking the man’s hand and holding on tight.

“Well, come on, let’s go.” Yejide grabbed her partner's wrist.

After a few dances, the little girl ran off to her mother and brothers with a beaming smile. Imani and the man went along with her to where her family was sharing peanut soup and *fufu*. The little girl gave the man most of hers, and the man gave his share to Imani. The dish would have been too hot for her if the fufu had not absorbed most of the spicy soup.

Yejide still danced with the other villagers. Imani was not sure how she had lost her friend, but she pushed the thought to the back of her mind, her attention locked on the man.

She smiled as he told jokes to the family. Even though he laughed at his own jokes, she couldn’t help but chuckle herself. Her sides were hurting when the village shaman cleared the drum circle.

“Brothers and Sisters of Bajok!” the shaman bellowed with a staff in his right hand. The village went silent. He wore a large headpiece made of palm and twine. A jeweled crystal covered one of his eyes, and his shoulders were draped in straw. One of his shoulders was plastered with a small ceremonial mask. Imani couldn’t tell what the face was, but she assumed it represented Deh’ala, the Gatekeeper spirit. Besides that, the shaman wore nothing else save for straw that covered his manhood and ankles. His body was painted bright blue with a few white streaks across his face.

“Let us welcome our brothers and sisters from the far lands of Ya-Seti!” The audience tapped their chests lightly, but the shaman shook his head. “That will not do. How will the spirits know of this union with such silent tongues? I say again, let us welcome our family from Ya-Seti!”

This time, the crowd pounded their chests so hard Imani could feel them through the ground. She joined in on the gesture, driven by the sheer energy emanating from the village. With the last round of cheers, wisps of smoke swirled from the fires surrounding the drum circle.

The shaman waved a hand, and the drummers of the circle came to his side. For a moment, it was silent as the crowd waited for the shaman’s next move. He placed his hand in the soft dirt below, lifting it as though he were holding a newborn child aloft. He clasped his hands together and shook the sand. The drummers thumped on their hides, keeping the shaman’s beat. This was important if they were to manifest the spirit—

both shaman and drum had to be in unison. He turned in circles, shouting in the language of the Old Spirits. Imani could only make out some of the names, such as Deh'ala.

After a few moments, the shaman cast the sand, pinch by pinch, into the fire pits surrounding him and his drum circle. Each fire went out the moment earth touched it. For what felt like an eternity, everything was dark. Only the stars lit the village circle. The shaman, the drum circle, the entire village, and its visitors remained still and silent.

And then, fire and rock surged twenty paces in the air.

It was stark white and bright as day—like no fire Imani had ever seen. Spirits shot out from these white flames. Imani couldn’t put the names to the shapes, but she felt their power within the circle. A few strides away, a woman shouted in joy. A few yards from that, a frail elder jumped up and stomped the ground like a newborn zebra.

“Spirits of Bajok! You have blessed us with your presence here! Is it assumed this marriage paints itself in Ula’s stars?”

Imani turned to the man she’d spent all this time with, but he was no longer there. The little girl and her family remained, enamored with the sights that flickered before them. But where had the man gone? She didn’t even know his name, or even worse, what he looked like. She stood, and another brilliant light flashed above the shaman.

“Ula! Great Spirit of the Cosmos,” the shaman began as a great wisp in the shape of a woman floated down in front of him. “Please, will the First Son of Bajok and our new sister of Ya-Seti join us!”

From the grand stage, the bride and groom-to-be stepped down to join the shaman and the spirits. A villager handed the Ya-Seti Princess a ceremonial mask. The First Son wore a large black mask with white markings, not unlike the man Imani had enjoyed her night with. Like the Great-Chief, the First Son also wore an elaborate headpiece—though less prominent, of course. The Princess now wore a large white mask with holes for her eyes. The markings on her mask were swirls like small suns.

“Please, young ones, sit among our spirits and ancestors.” The shaman waved an inviting hand to the surrounding space. They sat next to him without protest. “Please, Great and Powerful Ula, tell us if this is the right path for these two young souls!”

The spirits shifted and coiled around the pair, some passing straight through them. Goosebumps protruded from their skin. Imani swore she

could feel them, too, as though the judgement of the spirits did not pass only through the would-be Chief and his future wife, but through the entire village. Were the spirits asking if the village approved of this marriage, as well? Imani knew nothing of the Great-Chief, his son, or these foreign Ya-Seti. She would have to entrust the decision to the spirits and ancestors.

The marriage spirit called Ula spoke. The voice was unlike anything Imani had ever heard. It was neither human nor animal; it was … alien. But the shaman, a vessel between the spirits and the mortals, translated.

"*The man. The woman,*" the shaman began in a distorted voice. His eyes were stark white, and the jeweled crystal shone violet. "*Match, they could be. But this village still carries dark spirits and unnatural demons*."

"Tell us where these demons are, and we will cast them away!" the shaman proclaimed in his own voice again. It was strange how the shaman could go from speaking in the spirit's voice to his own so quickly.

"*These demons are difficult to see. Neither mortals nor spirits. Our vision does not see them clearly. Be wary, Children of Bajok.*"

The Great-Chief stepped forward. "Impossible; we rid our village of those vile beasts ages ago!" Because he didn't have his mask on, his red, flushed face could be seen openly.

"Our Chief speaks the truth. We have no—" said the shaman.

"*Something dark remains!*" the spirit shouted. "*This marriage cannot be claimed.*"

And then the white plumes crashed back into the fire pits. For a moment, the village was sheltered in darkness. Bajok and Ya-Seti alike were hushed. Slowly, the fires rose again to light the drum circle. The villagers of Bajok all looked to their Chief, who was still red-faced. The few Ya-Seti looked to their Kor. He remained unmoved.

"The Ya-Seti are demons!" one woman shouted from across the circle.

One of the foreigners shouted back in a language Imani could not understand.

"Leave! We don't want you here!" another villager cursed.

Another Ya-Seti, a handmaiden by the looks of her, clenched a fist and scowled.

"Silence!" the Great-Chief bellowed. "This is not how we treat our brothers and sisters from the east. These dark spirits remain our own. The Ya-Seti have nothing to do with it."

The Great-Chief looked to each person from his village, the powerful eyes of a father. There was a reason he was their leader. “It was my belief these demons were gone, and we’ve yet to see evidence they have returned.”

“What about those dead girls?” one villager said.

“Those were animal attacks!”

“The spirits don’t say that!”

“The spirits didn’t say anything at all!”

Imani looked for the man again. What was his damned name? The shaman raised his staff, then struck it against the earth. The dirt cracked. Dust rose and fell.

“You dare speak against the Great-Chief?” he shouted. His blue skin lit up as he spoke.

The clamoring voices settled.

“If these demons have returned, it is my obligation to destroy them again,” the Chief continued. He pointed his large finger at the villager who had shouted out of turn. “Those girls died to animal attacks.”

Silence.

“I trust that the people of Bajok will keep us safe during this time,” said the Ya-Seti bride-to-be. “In my homelands, we are often tested like this. Not by our ancestors, or our spirits, but by the elements and our own enemies. My father, our Kor, has taught us that men should be given the chance to prove themselves before we cry out against them. Are these festivals not held to cleanse the village of such evil spirits?”

“They are,” said the Great-Chief. “And thank you, young Shanaki. Already I can see you will prosper within our great village.”

“All due credit to my Kor-father.” She gestured to the old man gracefully who returned her nod slowly.

“So, should we not continue this cleanse?” Shanaki asked.

“Indeed, we should! Drummers!” The shaman gestured to them.

Once again, they pounded their hides and sang beautiful melodies. But it wasn’t enough. Though the village went back to eating, drinking, and dancing, the feeling wasn’t the same. There was an air of darkness.

Imani looked for the man again but couldn’t find him anywhere. She turned to the young girl she had played with earlier.

“Have you seen the man I was with?” Imani asked kindly.

The little girl shook her head, braids flying to and fro. Imani kept looking. He was no longer in the dance circle. None of the men in masks were him; they didn't dance as smoothly as he had.

She returned to the man serving the palm wine, but he had not seen her suitor either. Imani even went over to the fighting circle, but he wasn't there.

For a moment, Imani thought she'd never find him again. Maybe he had been a figment of her imagination. But no, he had played with the girl, and the wine server remembered him well enough. And Yejide! She had stepped between them before they'd parted ways.

Maybe she'd made a bad impression. Perhaps he was off with another beautiful girl, dancing and sharing fruit with her instead.

"Does your father know you're here?" a voice behind her said. Imani frowned. It was Nanga.

"That's really none of your concern." She turned around to face him. He was a Bajok warrior with broad shoulders and a chiseled body—but a terrible attitude.

"Seeing as my job is to protect Bajok with my life, I would say it is my business." Nanga crossed his arms, his spear clutched in one hand. "I won't tell your father if you give me a smile."

Imani scoffed. "You are ever the charmer. It's a wonder you haven't married."

Nanga only smiled. This was the type of man Imani had hoped to avoid, the kind of suitor that made her cringe. She needed to find a way out.

"Thank you, Nanga. I was looking all over for her." That voice … It was the man! That graceful man. Before she turned, she knew it was him. He smelled of sweet desert flowers just as before. But how could he? He had been dancing and sweating all night.

He still wore that mask, though. She'd have to fix that as soon as she could.

"I was speaking to her first," Nanga interjected.

"Shouldn't you be on the northern edges of the village?" the man asked. Nanga dropped his head. Something was wrong. Nanga never backed down so easily.

Nanga's frown twisted further down his mouth. Imani felt something in the air. It was intangible, but it ran through her like a dark cloud. "Yes, I

guess I should go back to my post.” Nanga turned on his heel and left.

“Sorry about all that,” the man said, touching Imani’s shoulder. The sensations she’d felt before evaporated. The man felt so warm, so … right.

“Let’s leave here, now.” Imani took his hand and started away from the festival grounds.

“Imani!” It was Yejide. She had lost her partner. “What are you doing?”

Imani stopped. The man took a polite step away, though he stood close enough to listen.

“We were supposed to leave together.” Yejide’s eyes were sharp but hurt. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing at all,” Imani said, though she had a hard time keeping her balance.

“You’re never like this,” Yejide said. She stepped in closer to whisper to Imani. “What’s so special about this one?—Well, I get it: nice body, kind, affectionate, and his face—Wait, we’ve not even seen his face! We don’t even know who he is! It’s like the story of Ife…”

“Well, I guess I’ll find out,” Imani answered.

“By yourself?”

“What’s so wrong with that?”

“Your father would not approve.” Yejide crossed her tiny arms.

“Good thing he’s not here,” Imani shot back. “Your father wouldn’t approve of you being here, either.”

“It’s a bad idea, Imani, that’s all I’m saying. Something feels wrong about that man.” Yejide stole a glance at him. He waited patiently, tapping his feet to the beat of the drum like he had no care in the world.

“Well, I have a good feeling about him. I can’t explain it.” Imani turned to the man. She couldn’t wait anymore. She needed to be with him now. But why? Yejide was right; he was a bit *too* perfect.

What’s wrong with that? Imani thought. That’s what they were looking for in the first place, right? *Yejide is just jealous.*

“Just trust me, okay?”

“No!” Yejide shouted, tugging at Imani’s arm. “We’re leaving.”

“Let go of me!” Imani pushed back. “You can’t keep me from him! Just because no man wants your skin-and-bones doesn’t mean I can't have any fun.”

Yejide's eyes watered. They had been friends for years, and Imani had never raised her voice at Yejide. Everything felt wrong, yet the man felt so right. What was happening to her?

"Is everything okay?" said the man. When he placed his hand on Imani's back, she forgot all about her worry and how she had hurt Yejide.

"Let's go." Imani grabbed the man again.

"Are you sure everything is fine?" he asked, looking over his shoulder to the now crying Yejide.

"Everything is perfect," Imani said. "Hurry, before someone else stops us."

It did not take long for Imani and the man to cross the outskirts of the village. The sounds of the drums went from loud thumps to indistinct pats. Imani stopped near a riverbed.

"Any farther and the beasts of the night will find us." The man chuckled.

"I'm with you; you'll protect us," Imani answered.

"You haven't even seen me fight."

"I don't have to." Imani still clutched his hand. "Why do you cover your face?"

The man's laughter subsided.

"Are you…" Imani whispered.

"Ugly? Disfigured? Both? No, I'm just—"

"Let me see your face."

"I shouldn't. I'm trying to be good."

"Good is for the priests and the shaman. I want to see your face."

The man shook his head at first. But after a short while, he agreed. He turned away from Imani as he removed his mask. His head was covered with well-maintained locs that flowed down his shoulders—though the sides of his head were bare.

Slowly, the man showed his face, the light of the moons shimmering atop his dark skin. Imani was first taken by his eyes. They were a golden brown, like the other villagers, but they were … moving? No, they couldn't be. The inside of eyes didn't move. But they were more beautiful than any sunrise Imani had ever seen.

The man's skin was too smooth to be real, no blemishes, no wrinkles, not even the dark shadow men had around their cheeks. His nose was a perfectly round shape and his lips …

That smile. His perfect teeth lit up brighter than the moons. Imani thought she heard music, but there was no music at all. She could still see the lights of the village in the distance, but the music was too far away to hear. No, this music came from him. It was that infectious laugh again. It was almost like a song.

Imani could have sworn she'd seen his face before. She just couldn't place it.

"I've seen you on the plains before … what's your name?"

The man answered, but Imani couldn't hear the response. His beauty confounded her mind. She was drunk on more than palm wine.

Before she knew it, the man's lips were on her neck, softly pecking. He moved his mouth down, lifting her shirt, his tongue lightly brushing her navel. Imani's eyes rolled into the back of her head. She'd felt nothing like this before.

Imani touched the man's face and pressed it against her own, tasting his sweet mouth, tracing his lips with her own. She let him touch her throbbing breasts as he kissed her harder and harder. Imani didn't mind. She wanted him to bite, wanted him to let her bleed. Imani's hands went to the back of the man's hair, but she felt something odd.

Where she expected to find smooth and soft skin was a growing lump. She could have sworn she felt—no it couldn't be—a nose? A snout, even?

The man's kisses were too hard now; his gentle love bites were more than painful.

"Slow down." Imani pushed him with her free hand.

But he wouldn't stop. He pressed his jaw harder against her throat. Her hand on the back of his head was being engulfed by—teeth?

"What is this?" Imani's heart pounded harder. Before she could pull her hand away, there was a crunch. Pain shot down Imani's arm. It didn't make sense—the back of the man's head had bitten Imani's hand. Yet the pain was real. Imani screamed but was silenced by the crunch of her own neck.

Then she fell.

The young woman looked to her hand that was no longer there, replaced now with a bloody stub. She tried to scream again, but she had no throat. Terror filled her now. The man towered above her—no, not a man, a beast. A dark spirit. A demon.

The man was now on all fours, but his joints were impossibly crooked and bending backward. The back of his head was no longer his back but his front. Peeking through the part in his locs was the face of a hyena, cackling and laughing; the same laugh that had sounded so beautiful just moments ago. Its mouth was matted with blood, and it was salivating.

The last thing Imani saw was a bloody maw enveloping her face.

LINE OF SUCCESSION

JB CAINE

When Isabeau hears that her husband Orin, the leader of their shape-shifter Clan, has died under suspicious circumstances, she must find the truth about what happened to him before Orin's crafty brother Seth takes Orin's place as Clan Leader.

“What are you talking about? Where is his body?” Grief raged through me like a storm. Orin couldn’t be dead. Seth had to be lying.

“We couldn’t get it out of the mine shaft, Isa. Not without sending someone else into the rattlers’ nest. Somehow, he must not have noticed the rotted boards…”

“It's absurd and you know it. Orin would have smelled a snake nest of that size.” Even in human form, shifters have excellent senses. Whether he was in his human skin or his wolf pelt, he would not have missed the stench, and probably not the sound either. It wasn’t quite cold enough for the snakes to be hibernating yet.

“Isabeau.” Seth spoke softly with great sadness in his eyes, but I wasn’t buying it. This was all one of his elaborate tricks. It had to be. “I wish it were untrue. No one mourns my brother’s death more than I do.”

He laid his hand on my shoulder, and I shook it off, wailing in my loss. “Do you think I'm a fool? You hated him. He was too tender-hearted to see it, but…”

“You wound me, Isa. Never would I wish harm on my brother.”

“We both know that isn’t true. So does half the clan.”

“You Sky People. Always looking for the invisible. You know I adored Orin, and I never begrudged him his good fortune. I supported him as Clan Leader, just as I will support you as his mate until a new Clan Leader is chosen.”

I stared at him, venom in my eyes just as potent as what Seth claimed had killed the love of my life. I placed my hand on my belly, only barely swollen with Orin’s and my first child. “If you loved him so much, where are your tears?” I spat as my own flowed freely down my cheeks. “Where is your mourning? And how dare you leave his body behind to rot in a hole rather than to be buried properly by his clan?”

A fresh wave of hysteria bowled me over, and I found myself on my knees. He’s lying. Orin’s alive and being held somewhere. The thought gave me the thinnest sliver of hope.

“We tried, Isa. We did. But there was no way to pull him from the pit without endangering more of us. He would not have wanted us to lose another clanmate just to retrieve what must already return to the earth. Please. I owe it to him to care for you and for the child.” He smiled his smooth and toothy smile, and my pain morphed into rage. No doubt he thought to take Orin’s place as Leader.

Grabbing onto the wispy strand of hope, I fought my way to my feet. Seth reached out a hand to steady me, but I swatted it away. “Where were you hunting?”

“In the Bighorn National Forest, near Walker Mountain. A little outside our usual

hunting grounds, but not by much. Look, there are probably dozens of old mine shafts left over from the Gold Rush. It was an accident, Isa.” He reached out for me again. Perhaps he wanted to claim more than just Orin’s place as leader. Fear for myself and my unborn child pumped adrenaline through my system.

“You're lying!” I turned from him and fled, though I had no destination in mind. Somehow, jumping into the Jeep and driving back to our house in Sheridan seemed impossible. Staying here at the clan’s lodge seemed equally impossible. All I wanted was to have my husband back, and I didn’t know where on Earth I could make that happen.

I had to start with the tiny light of possibility which had pulled me from my agony. Maybe he wasn’t dead at all. By his own admission, neither Seth nor the other two members of the hunting party had gone into the viper pit to try and save Orin. Perhaps he had just been unconscious. It was all I had to hold onto.

Wyoming is rough to travel in by car. Not so much because of the condition of the roads, though sometimes that was an issue, but more because there were so few roads compared to other places. It’s what made it ideal for our little shifter community to live safely and undetected among the humans. Privacy took the form of vast plains, dense evergreen forests, and craggy mountains. No, if I wanted to get to Walker Mountain quickly, I needed to fly.

I stretched out my arms and summoned the ancestral spirits of the Sky People, giving them a prayer of honor, and shivered as the feathers burst forth and covered my shrinking form. I leapt into the sky and gave an owlish cry as I soared into the fading daylight, just one more owl on the hunt.

It was late into the night when I reached the cabin our clan owned on the outskirts of the National Forest. It was yet another practical choice on our part…all sorts of animals made their homes in the National Forests of the Rockies, and having easy access to federal land meant vast areas where any shifter could run free with minimal chance of encountering a human. In our animal forms, we hunted in the National Forests as well as in and out of hunting season, making it easier to avoid the risks of human hunters and their guns.

I called back my human skin, retrieved the key from its hiding place, and let myself into the well-provisioned cabin. It was evident that Seth and the others had recently been here, and I closed my eyes and wept at the thought that only the memory of his scent would remain before long. My human nose was far better than my avian one, and soon this last sense of him would be gone. But no! I couldn't afford such thoughts until I had proof he was dead.

I opened a can of soup and ate it cold, lacking the energy to cook it but knowing I needed the nourishment, and so did the tiny life growing in my belly. When I finished the soup, I found the bunk where Orin had slept, and crawled beneath the woolen blanket, wrapping myself in the traces of his scent. I cried myself to sleep, praying to the Old Gods that my hope was not in vain.

A few short hours later, I woke as the first light of dawn crept across the floorboards of the cabin. Now the search could begin in earnest. Forcing myself to eat an entire tin of canned peaches, I planned my search. A small desk sat in the corner of the cabin with pens, paper, matches, candles, and–perhaps most importantly–a map of the region.

I surveyed the area and devised a search pattern, cursing my owl form because it was no good for tracking the scents of the hunting party. Oh, to be a wolf-like Orin! I would

have to rely on sharp eyesight to try and find the mineshaft with the broken boards, but I had a sizable area to search.

I began my search in the town of Wolf, because there was an outfitters shop where our clan often went if they were hunting in human form. It was

also close enough that I could drive the ATV, which looked like the offspring of a golf cart and a pick-up truck. As an owl, I would not need such things, but as an owl, I would not be able to ask questions or gather clues.

“Can I, uh, help you, miss?” The young clerk in Wild Side Provisions eyed me with a mix of suspicion and alarm. How wild and desperate I must have looked with my puffy eyes and haggard appearance!

“I hope so,” I began, trying to calm my voice somewhat so he wouldn’t suggest I call the police with my inquiry. “My family came through town on a hunting trip a few days ago, and I was hoping to catch up with them. Four men. Two of them were a little above six feet, and two of them were maybe a little shorter…”

He interrupted before I could finish my description. “Yeah, I saw ‘em. Not from around here. They sorta stood out, even though we do get a few outsiders once elk season opens.”

“Stood out? In what way?”

“Oh, I dunno. Mostly when folks come through, they’re jokin’ and joshin’. But your bunch seemed downright stern. Guess they’re pretty serious about huntin’.”

“I suppose they are. Did they happen to say anything about where they might be hunting?”

The young man scratched his peach fuzz of a beard and thought about it. “I don’t reckon they did. The tall brown-haired one, though, he bought a prospector’s map. I remember because we sold a few of those in the summer, but it’s been a while. Hunters usually aren’t too interested in searching for mines and whatnot. It might be a little early to stumble into a den of bears hibernatin’, but you can’t be too careful, you know?”

“Of course. Was there a lot of prospecting around here?” What was Seth up to, buying a prospecting map? Perhaps looking for a place to hide his brother?

“A fair bit, sure. Especially over into the Park, around Walker and She-Bear Mountains. Not easy going, but the hunting would probably be pretty good out that way. You’d have to go off the Prairie Trail, but once you get into the hills…” He shrugged, indicating he didn’t have a lot more information for me. “I don’t think I’d head out to that area alone, though, miss. If they’re out that way, you aren’t likely to find ‘em just on happenstance.”

“I’m sure you’re right. I’ll keep looking around and see if I can figure out where they chose to stay. They might even be camping. Do you happen to have any more of those maps?”

The young man sold me one, and I looked over it as I gassed up the ATV. It was meant to be more of a novelty with historical information than an actual guide to the area, but I suspected it was sufficient for what Seth had in mind. I mentally noted areas that looked most promising for mining.

With each passing hour, I was more sure my brother-in-law had had nefarious intentions from the outset. He had seemed to support Orin as Clan Leader to the public eye, but privately, he often criticized and belittled my mate, hinting that Orin’s live-and-let-live attitude belied weakness. A handful in the clan shared this view and believed it was more natural for us to be ruled by strength rather than led in peace.

I folded the map and put it in the glove compartment of the ATV. I checked the other gear I had brought: rope, an oilskin tarp, water, a sleeping bag, a first aid kit, and a smoke flare. Then I fired up the ATV and headed south/southwest toward Walker Mountain and the Prairie Trail. I drove as far as I could on established trails, then pulled the vehicle off into some dense trees and prepared to take to the sky to further my search.

I called forth my feathers and lit into the sky. I couldn’t fly too high, since I wanted to be able to search well, but it would be much faster than searching on foot. Mid-day was an unusual time for humans to see an owl, to be sure, but my presence in this form would do little more than raise an eyebrow or garner a photo on someone’s phone. Besides, the sun would set around 5:00, so I had to make the most of my time.

My eyes were focused mostly on the ground, but I couldn’t help noticing the already-snow-capped crags of Cloud Peak to my south, rising high out of the ocean of trees. Small prairies nestled themselves among lower mountains, bursts of light green amid the deep and varied shades of spruce, pine, and fir, dotted with the occasional aspens, their leaves glimmering like gold in the autumn sun. In some other time, I would be

inspired and awed by the beauty around me, but today, I sought a lone figure or a hole with broken boards at its mouth.

The day wore on and I fought the rising wave of hopelessness as the futility of such a task began to set in. Once, I felt a flare of hope when I spotted a lone hiker, but when I saw the long black braids on either side of his backpack, my heart broke yet again. It was entirely possible Seth had completely lied about where Orin had been lost, knowing full well that I would insist on finding him. It was nearly 3:00, with the shadows lengthening along the eastern ridges before I found what I sought.

Just west of the mountain, near a rocky outcropping circled by lodgepole pines and Douglas firs, the setting sun revealed an irregularity in the landscape. I swooped in to investigate and found a squarish hole framed with logs that were riddled with dry rot. Immediately, I realized that, if this was the shaft entrance I'd been looking for, there was no way Orin would have accidentally fallen into that darkness. Not only were the logs resting very visibly above ground, but it had been at least partially boarded over. He could not have missed the sight of it.

I crept to the edge of the chasm and peered within, my strigine eyes cutting through the shadows. I spied a human-like form below, and my heart thumped within my chest. It would not be an easy descent, even for my avian form, as owls were not built for diving into close-quartered caverns, but hope propelled me forward.

Nearly thirty feet down, I dug my talons into the layer of dirt covering the floor of the tunnel. Even my limited sense of smell detected the stench of decay over the acrid aroma of guano. An agonized *hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo* escaped me, and I wished I could screech like some of my smaller cousins.

Orin's body lay at the bottom of the shaft, limbs akimbo and neck at an alarming angle. I didn't even have the momentary respite of being able to imagine that he was simply unconscious as I took in the grisly sight. I had tried to steel myself against this, but the reality of his death shredded my very soul. If not for the life growing within me, I would have dashed myself against the rocks so I might lay beside him in death.

Even in my maelstrom of grief, I noted one thing: the complete absence of snakes.

The truth of Orin's murder–and murder it was–lodged itself within me. If he had fallen

by accident, there would have been no issue in retrieving his body. No, that was not what had happened. If he had been alive when he stood at the mouth of the mine shaft, the fall had certainly killed him. And Seth, the lying bastard, had left my love here to rot.

Just as the sun was setting, I managed to return with the ATV and the rope, my eyes nearly swollen shut from crying. But I could not fail Orin in this last act of love and respect. I tied one end of the rope to the ATV, then shifted and flew back into the hole with the other. I was grateful now for an owl's weak sense of smell. I shifted back into human form and gently touched Orin's wavy black hair.

"Orin, I'm so sorry…" The tears came again, and I let them flow for a moment more before screwing up my courage to do what needed to be done. Gently, I lifted Orin's head and shoulders and wound the rope under his armpits, tying a bowline knot against his back. Then I shifted again and soared back out of the hole.

I turned the key on the ATV and the engine sprung to life. Slowly, I urged it forward and away from the shaft, drawing my beloved's body out at the end of the rope. Once Orin had been pulled onto the surface, I untied both ends of the rope, laid out the oilskin tarp, and rolled the body of my beloved onto it. Then, taking my time, I wrapped him in the heavy cloth, tying seven knots tightly, offering prayers to the spirit of the Great Wolf. I was no priestess, but no prayers were ever more heartfelt.

Maneuvering his body into the passenger side of the vehicle was difficult, particularly since I was trying to be as delicate with Orin as I could. It took me nearly 40 minutes, but eventually, I had him buckled in safely. I wished I had thought to bring a spare jerrycan of gas, since I would not be able to travel back through Wolf when I returned to the hunting cabin.

I had made it maybe two miles in the deepening darkness when it occurred to me that returning to the cabin might not be safe. Clearly, Seth's two cronies were loyal to him, and had agreed to cover up Orin's death. I would be a fool not to expect him to know where I had gone, and more foolish still to think he wouldn't do whatever it took to silence me. I

pulled into the shelter of a few sparse trees, keeping a keen lookout for late-returning horseback riders from one of the local ranches.

Where could I possibly go? The simple answer was: Not far. At least not with Orin. I didn't want to leave him unprotected. It was only a matter of time before Seth returned to the scene of the crime, and with his lupine senses and hunting skills, he would have some ability to track me if I stayed off the paved roads. It was a conundrum, because paved roads meant more people, and an increased likelihood someone would question the wrapped figure in the seat next to me.

Taking his body to a police station was an option, but there would be so much to explain, and I couldn't risk the exposure it would bring to our clan. It was impossible to make it all the way home in the ATV…it was just too far. And the worst part…I wasn't sure who in our clan I could trust. Who else had been in on the plot to depose Orin as Clan Leader? Frustration and helplessness welled up within me yet again.

Think, I chided myself. *You don't have the luxury of failure*. I wracked my brain, desperately trying to come up with even one person who was privy to the shifter community and could be trusted not to call Seth if I showed up. Oh, and someone who lived within 10 miles. In this terrain, and given how far I had already driven, I wouldn't make it much farther.

Then a single name came to me: Therese Worland. Her father had been a shifter, and her mother had been a Shoshone woman with a great gift for medicine. Therese had no ability to shift, but the magical blood in her veins seemed to amplify the mystical gifts her mother possessed. Therese had been a friend of Orin's father's, and had performed our Joining ceremony three years ago.

I could not bring Orin's body to her house, since it was considered tremedously bad luck in her culture. But there had to be some way she could help me. She lived outside of Dayton, only a few miles away. It would take some finesse to reach her without interacting with people, but hopefully my ancestors would watch out for me.

I headed north toward the only chance I had.

I stopped the ATV a respectful distance from Therese's house and shone the headlights toward her windows. A rustle at the curtain showed that she had noticed my presence, and I stepped out into the weak electric light that illuminated her front yard.

The door opened and a solid woman of 50-some-odd years stood silhouetted in the light from within. "Who's there? Can't see a thing with those headlights in my eyes!" She sounded mildly annoyed, but I couldn't really blame her.

"It's Isabeau Gillette. I'm sorry to come here uninvited and so late, but something has happened, and I desperately need your help. I don't know who else I can trust." My voice broke as I spoke the last sentence and Therese moved down her front steps toward me.

"What's happened, Isa?"

I found myself unable to speak as the promise of help and safety washed over me. My knees buckled and I found myself sobbing, clutching handfuls of gravel from her driveway.

I didn't even notice her approach, but when I felt her strong arms around me, my last bit of strength ebbed away and I collapsed, unconscious, against her.

I heard the crackling of the fire before I had the will to open my eyes. Somewhere in another room, I heard the clinking of cups and the sloshing of water. I stretched out my fingers and felt rough fabric beneath me as I heard the soft padding of Therese's slippered footsteps moving closer. I forced my eyes open and found myself staring at a textured ceiling. The light from the flames gave everything a golden glow.

"Ah, good, you're back with me." Therese set down two coffee mugs with the telltale strings from tea bags hanging out of the sides. I sat up slowly, and she sat beside me, taking my hands in hers. "Is that Orin in your tiny truck?"

I nodded, unable to speak, and she sighed.

"Oh, my dear girl. Tell me what's happened."

I summed up the facts and shared what I suspected, and my heart felt hollow as a drum. "It's not safe for me to go back, but I have to find a way

to warn the Clan. They must know what he's done, or they'll likely make him Clan Leader in Orin's place."

The woman nodded slowly, her mind working on the problem. She seemed to decide something. "Well, we can't leave him out in the yard, or some scavenger is likely to…well, you know. We'll have to put him in the shed for the moment." I slanted my eyes toward her. "Don't look at me like that, Isa. I can't bring him in here. I love you both, but I can't have his ghost infecting my house. We'll put him in the shed for tonight, then tomorrow we'll take care of business. Once we're done, I'll destroy the shed so his ghost won't be trapped here."

"You've seen his ghost?"

"No, of course not. And I'd like to keep it that way. But it seems it isn't meant to be. Doesn't mean I have to keep him here, though."

I tried to work out what she was trying to say, but it made no sense. "What business are we going to take care of tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, my dear, we ask him what happened. And then we figure out what to do about Seth. Tonight, however, you're going to drink this chamomile tea, nestle down in that fleecy blanket, and get some rest. You'll need your strength for what's coming."

The next morning, Therese woke me at sunrise. I wasn't sure how she'd managed it, but she'd crept past me, out into the yard, and dragged her gardening equipment out of the rickety wooden shed that now housed Orin's body.

"What now?" I looked at her, confused by what I was seeing.

"Now we find out exactly what happened. We only get one shot at this, but if it works, you'll have the ammunition you need to go back and depose Seth. That is what you want, yes?"

I nodded. The morning was cold, so Therese wrapped me in a parka and a blanket and directed me to sit in the lawn chair she'd pulled out from who-knows-where. She disappeared back into the house for a minute, then reappeared with a steaming cup.

"You must go on a vision quest, and if he is waiting for you, you will see Orin and get to speak to him one last time in this life. I don't know

how long the vision will last, so you must not let yourself get distracted by all the things I'm sure you want to tell him. If you want answers, this is your one chance to get them."

"Why only one chance? Couldn't we do this again if it doesn't work the first time?"

"No, Isa, that's not how it works. In order for him to speak to you, I must release his ghost. He must be separated from the physical bonds that hold him here in this world so that he can move on to the Land of the Coyote."

My eyes widened, and I turned and looked at the pile of garden tools next to the house. "You mean to burn him. Burn the shed."

"It must be done. His spirit must be set free, and the building is now a tether for him."

"But that would be burning all of the evidence against Seth…" My mind spun. I wasn't expecting a solution with such finality.

"Were you planning to take him to the human authorities? Then why did you bring him here at all?"

I tried to think clearly, and of course, she was right. It would be a huge mistake to expose our entire clan in some hope of human justice. We had to handle things our own way, as it had always been. I took a deep breath. "No, you're right. Your way is the only way."

"We must begin the ceremony before the sun has fully risen. Drink this." She handed me the cup. "I will say the necessary prayers, and when you seem to have slipped into the in-between place, I'll start the fire. Do you wish to view his body one more time?" She added the last question as an afterthought.

I shook my head. I had already seen the damaged shell of Orin that Seth had left behind. I didn't need any more memories of it. I took a deep breath and drank the hot liquid, which tasted of spices and earth. I sat back on the chair as Therese circled the shed, chanting in a language I did not know. For a moment, I thought she called my name, but as I trained my ears on her tapestry of sound, I heard the word *bia'isa* – the Shoshone word for wolf and one of the only words in her language I knew – woven into her song. She trailed scented smoke from the bundle of herbs in her hand.

As I watched her, the scene before me began to slowly morph into a blend of colors like a watercolor painting. If I had stood enough distance away, I was sure I'd be able to make out the middle-aged woman, the shed,

and the growing fire, but as it was, I only saw a mass of oranges, browns, blues, and whites.

From the center of the cloud of colors, a figure began to take shape. I didn't need the sharpness of my owl sight to recognize the form of the man who I held close to me for six years of my life, three as his lover and three as his wife. He moved forward and the details of his features took shape. I tried to rise and go to him, but my limbs would not respond.

"My sweet Isabeau. I am so sorry to leave you."

His eyes were sad, full of dreams that would never be for the two of us.

"Orin…" My voice broke. I wanted to hold onto this vision forever, to be with him even in this place.

"You must raise our son. Tell him stories. Make sure he knows me through your love."

I wanted to wail, to cry, to protest the unfairness of the fate that had befallen us, but I also didn't want to waste these precious last few moments on wishes that would never come true.

"Tell me what happened to you, my love. Tell me what vengeance I must take."

His expression grew serious as he stood above me, his form haloed in the rising sunlight. *"Seth came to me as we waited for the deer to come, told me that Mathias had fallen into a mine shaft, and that he needed help. Of course, I followed him at once. We leaned over the edge of the hole together, and then Mathias and Evan rushed toward us and pushed me in. I don't remember anything after that except emptiness and then the hooting of an owl. I knew then that you had found me."* He smiled at me then, his eyes full of love, knowing that I had not failed him.

"Seth seeks to be Clan Leader." It wasn't a question. That had been his motive all along.

Orin nodded. *"He will destroy our Clan if left to lead it. He has no loyalty, except to his own selfish interests. The power of leading a small Clan will not satisfy him. Soon, he will lust for wider territory, even wage war with other Clans to increase what he believes he possesses. This cannot happen."*

"How can I stop him? He is stronger than I am. The Earth People are stronger than the Sky People. Even with my relatives, I cannot defeat him, especially not with others at his side."

“With the exception of Mathias and Evan, the others who follow him do so out of fear. You must give them something greater to believe in. The Earth People will follow you if you can expose and humiliate my brother.”

The sun had risen so that it touched the top of his head, and something in my soul told me that our time was short.

“Is there anything else you can tell me that will help me bring justice?” Orin shook his head sadly. “Then sit with me, and we will watch one more sunrise together.”

He sat on the edge of the lawn chair and took my paralyzed hands in his. “The sun can rise, but I will watch its reflection in your eyes. "*I believe in you, Isabeau. You have it within you to lead our Clan, and our son will be strong and good. My spirit will always be near*

you, even if you cannot see me. It will be as if I was only away on a long hunting trip, and someday you will come to join me on the hunt. Live your life knowing that your happiness and safety and that of our son is the greatest legacy I leave behind.”

Just then, one final question sprung to mind, one that I hadn’t thought to ask before.

“What shall I name him?”

“His name shall be Harlow, and he shall be of the Sky People like his mother.” Orin’s eyes overflowed with pride and love as the rays of the sun grew bright and strong, like the son he would never see. He leaned forward and kissed my forehead gently. I closed my eyes, drinking in the feeling, and when I opened them again, he was gone, lost in the rays of the sun.

The Earth People were far more gifted at cunning than the Sky People, but sometimes, cunning went hand-in-hand with wisdom, which was the Sky People’s strength. I had spoken the truth to Orin…I did not have the physical strength to battle Seth and his followers. Mathias and Evan were both Earth People, bear and fox. Most of Seth’s other loyalists were likely to be Earth People, too, as Sky People rarely cared much for the philosophy of ruling by might. My best bet was to reach out to the Sky People before returning home, trying to win them over to my side and

having them work amongst the remainder of the Clan to persuade whichever Earth People could be persuaded to listen.

I used Therese's phone to call my mother's people, who consisted mostly of owls and hawks. The first call I made was to my grandmother, who was far too old to fight on any side, but who was revered among the races of the Sky.

"Hello?" Her voice was cautious, probably because she didn't recognize the number that came up on her caller ID.

"Grandmother? It's Isa."

"Isa! My little one! Where have you been? Everyone has feared for your safety!"

"I'm safe, Grandmother, at least for now. I assume you heard about Orin?"

"Yes, my dearest. We feared you might take your life out of grief. Seth has gone to search for you. He will be most relieved…"

"You mustn't tell him anything! I know that you are wise, Grandmother, and I beg you to hear me out before telling anyone that I've called you." I went on to tell her of Seth's betrayal, of finding Orin and verifying that Seth's story had been a lie. I then told her of the vision quest and what Orin's ghost had told me before he passed into the Other World. I feared that she would think me mad with grief, but she listened patiently and asked a few pointed questions as I spoke.

"You say the Medicine Woman assisted you in this vision quest?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"I was acquainted with her mother before her. She is wise and has great gifts. If she says it is as you say, then I know it is not your broken heart speaking with your voice. I will send whispers among the Sky People and learn what I can. Orin was much beloved. I am certain there are those among the Earth People who will fall in beside you. This is a dangerous road you travel, child. Are you certain that you wish to make this challenge?"

"It must be done, Grandmother. I have no passion to lead, but I love my Clan, and I cannot let it be ripped apart by one with such a deceitful

soul.”

“Those with no passion to lead make the best leaders,” she told me. “Give me until

sunset to speak to the Sky People and find out who your other allies are.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

“And another thing, Isa. You must not come here. If it is as you say, then no doubt Seth will have my house under watch. You must come in a way they will not expect. There is a Sending Away Ceremony for Orin at dawn tomorrow. Perhaps that is when you should come. Seth is searching for you now, but he will be back in plenty of time to show himself as a respectful brother to try and gain the loyalty of those who supported Orin. The ceremony will be at the clearing at sunrise. Come early, then watch and wait for your opportunity.”

“Thank you for your wisdom, Grandmother. May the Old Gods bless you as you walk today.”

“I love you, Isabeau. Be careful.”

One of the benefits of being a nocturnal creature is the ability to make my way to familiar places at night. I arrived at the clearing hours before dawn and positioned myself carefully downwind to the in-routes, but close enough to see who was coming and when. Seth might be a fratricidal monster, but he was no fool. He would have returned to the mine shaft and found Orin’s body missing. He would have seen the ATV tracks and been able to follow them as far as the paved road. I hoped he would not have guessed where I had gone, and that he would be banking on me returning here with the evidence of a non-snake-bitten corpse. He would have been watching our house in Sheridan and any route that would bring me to our Clan’s home lands east of town.

I was relying on the idea that he would have assumed I would not abandon Orin’s body, and that I would insist on returning it here to our Clan.

I knew that my confrontation with him would be a huge gamble, and that there was no way to know how many of the Clan would be on my side

when it began. He would not kill me in front of the Clan, no matter what I accused him of, because everyone knew I was pregnant. But he could banish me with the intent of hunting me down later.

As dawn approached, our people began arriving in the clearing, each carrying an armful of wood. Ordinarily, this would have been for a great pyre where Orin's earthly body would have been burned and his spirit released into the Wild. Without his body, they would make a smaller bonfire as a ceremonial gesture. I clutched in my talons the Medicine bag that Therese had given me, containing sacred herbs and a scoop of Orin's ashes. She had spoken many blessings over it, and I had added prayers to the Old Gods and some of my own tears and blood.

The morning was a misty one, and the first gray light of day gave the trees and the clearing an otherworldly glow. I counted 42 of our people in attendance, including Seth, his cronies, and my own grandmother and cousins. Seth assumed the northernmost point of the circle, the place that rightfully was his brother's. He wore a mask of solemnity, but his eyes were shifty, expecting a disruption. I imagined he was quite frustrated that he hadn't found me or the ATV.

As the light touched the treetops, Seth began his eulogy. "It is with great sadness that I face you today, friends. Not only do I mourn for my lost brother, but I fear the worst for his mate. No trace of her has been found by our scouts. Many of you witnessed the extremity of her grief. We shall continue to search, but we must all prepare for the worst.

"My brother believed in the harmony of all things, in the balance of the Earth. And as such, we mourn his loss to us, but celebrate his return to the bosom of the Earth Mother."

At this invocation, everyone stepped forward and added their bundles of wood to the

log frame erected in the center of a shallow indentation, ringed by stones like a giant fire pit.

"I will miss Orin all the days of my life," Seth continued, his voice rising in strength. "He was an inspiration to all who knew him, and I would not hesitate to take his place in death." Seth's hypocrisy turned my stomach. He lifted a torch high and stepped toward the woodpile, setting it alight and stepping back outside the stone circle.

This was the moment. Owls were known for silent flight, and when I dropped out of the trees into Seth's sight, it was far too late for him to stop

me. I swooped low over the fire and dropped the Medicine bag into the flames. The copper powder within it would burn a green-blue when the contents were consumed, an unnecessary bit of drama, perhaps, but I felt like my beloved deserved at least that moment among his people.

There was no doubt that all had seen me, and there were gasps and murmurs of my name as I circled back and landed before the fire, outside of Seth's reach, but within the sight of all.

I shifted into my human form, knowing that I must use my words now to persuade anyone I could to turn against this usurper.

"You wish to trade places with him?" I asked, my voice laced with acid. "Sadly, I can't push you down a mine shaft as you did with him, but please feel free to leap upon his funeral pyre and join him!"

"Isabeau! Thank the Old Gods that you're safe!"

"Spare me the theatrics, Seth. I have come to expose your betrayal, as you knew I would. Hear me, friends! Many of you know that Seth disagreed with Orin's leadership and felt that the mantle of Clan Leader should be his instead. What none of us could have known was the lengths he would go to take that mantle for his own!"

"Isa, my sister, your grief has twisted you…" In the shadows of the firelight, I saw Mathias, Evan, and a handful of other Clan members melt into the trees, no doubt to try and flank me and grab me from other directions.

"Orin did die in a mine shaft, as he claims, but there were no snakes to be found. When I found Orin, his neck was broken from the fall. There were no bite marks. The shaft was not hidden or hard to see. Orin had been lured there with the story that Mathias had fallen and needed help, and then, on Seth's command, Mathias and Evan rushed Orin and pushed him in."

"That is ludicrous, Isa. I would never do such a thing. What possible proof do you have of this? Not Orin's body, clearly. These are horrific accusations."

I had expected him to challenge me this way and knew that I could not produce what he asked. It was only my faith in the wisdom of my Clan that gave me any hope at all.

"I took Orin's body to the Medicine Woman and she released his spirit in fire. Before he crossed to the Other World, his ghost told me what you

had done, which only gave detail to what I had already pieced together when I found his broken body at the bottom of the mineshaft."

"Do you hear yourself, Isa?" His voice boomed out the question to fill the Clan with doubt. "His ghost? My dear sister, you've been through such a shock. I'm sure everyone understands your rage and grief. But wanting to blame me doesn't make it the truth."

"The Medicine Woman has seen his body." My grandmother stepped forward, putting her own life at risk alongside mine. "She verifies that there were no bite marks. She watched over Isabeau during the vision quest and lit the funeral fire herself. She has nothing to gain by taking a side here."

A sizzling sound from the fire told me that the Medicine bag had caught aflame, and I saw the burst of color out of the corner of my eye. Mathias and Evan emerged from the crowd behind me and grabbed my arms, restraining me.

Sylvie, another of the Earth people, a fox when she was in animal form, stepped forward and held one knife to my throat and another to my belly. "Don't try to shift," she hissed at me.

Seth approached as the others held me fast. "The Medicine Woman is not one of ours. She may have any number of reasons to lie for you."

"Is it the Medicine Woman's imagination that your associate here holds a knife on your unborn nephew?" There was mumbling among the crowd. My point was well-taken, as children were sacred to us, and threatening one with harm was cause for exile.

"She did not do so on my orders."

There was a pop in the fire and the blue-green flame burnt out, its supply of the mineral powder spent. Sylvie bared her human teeth savagely, and for a moment I feared the worst. But then she whipped around, pulling the knives away and turning her rage on the leader that had betrayed her to the Clan's justice to keep his own name clear of blame. I hazarded a look around, and noticed that the Sky People had moved forward, tightening the ring of people so that the betrayers could not run.

"Everything I've done has been on your orders," she spat. "That and the promise to take me as your mate when you became the Leader. You treacherous bastard!"

Seth was caught in his own web. The Earth People began tightening the circle as well, and the expression on Seth's face twisted into a mixture of

panic and rage.

Sylvie did not look away from his face, but shouted over her shoulder to Mathias and Evan. “Do you think he won’t betray you, too? He will run away and leave us to die a traitor’s death! His promises mean nothing!”

“I don’t need promises,” he growled. “Our Clan will follow the strongest among us, because that’s how Nature works. Throw her in the fire!” he yelled to the men who held my arms. “Let her join her beloved. Do the same with anyone who opposes me, starting with this one.” His eyes dripped venom at Sylvie.

She lunged at him with both knives slashing, but he had expected her attack and parried, spinning her around and pinning her wrists to her sides with his powerful arms. Pandemonium broke out amongst the Clan, and some of the People shifted into their animal forms. Animals and humans alike advanced on those of us in the center of the circle. The cries of hawks, wolves, owls, and a handful of other creatures split the air with their chaos.

Mathias and Evan, knowing a fight was coming, tensed their grip on me, preparing to shove me into the flames. I fought and struggled, but was no match for their combined strength. From across the flames, a streak of white slammed into Evan, throwing the three of us off balance and sending us crashing to the ground. Recognizing a momentary advantage, I broke their grips and leapt toward the safety of the mob.

Many hands found me and forced me to the outside of the circle, where my baby would remain safe. Grandmother found me then, and cradled me in her arms, stroking my hair and weeping. I did not see what happened next, but the snarling and screaming told me the story. When the crowd parted, bloody claws and muzzles and talons and beaks painted a gory picture of the Clan’s justice for my treasonous brother-in-law and his goons. Sylvie was restrained by human hands, but she did not fight because they had allowed her to live. At least in exile, she would survive.

What was left of Seth, Mathias, and Evan was thrown into the fire, and the stench of burning meat filled the air. The screech of hawks and eagles, the howls of wolves, and the

yips of foxes filled the sky.

And off in the distance, the familiar howl of a lone wolf in the Wild caressed my ear, the wind carrying the sound far away into the Land of the Coyote.

LOOM OF SILK AND WRATH

ATHENA AND ARACHNE

KILLIAN WOLF

CHAPTER 1

Miranos's laugh is the best sound in the world. His eyes beam with amusement under the darkening shade of the olive tree as twilight becomes night. "Are you making fun of me?" I giggle.

"I would never!" but he passes me a side-eye that says he'll stop at nothing to get a rise out of me, so long as it makes me squirm.

I bite my bottom lip and tap my hand on his chiseled shoulder, playfully pushing him. "I meant what I said. I would sooner stick a needle through my own eye than have the gods make a sport of my life."

"Your bravery sends a thrill down to my core. No one would ever speak as you do about the gods. Everyone is so afraid of their wrath, but you?" He smiles whimsically, a tawny curl bouncing on his forehead.

"Yes?" I smirk. "Me what?"

He shakes his head and smiles out toward the city of Colophon from over this hill. A warm breeze tussles his hair. "Nothing. You're fearless is all."

I shrug modestly. "I only speak the truth. I'd sooner worship Demeter or Hecate who—" His finger is on my lips before I can utter another sound. I blink at him.

"That mouth of yours is going to be the end of you, and me." He chuckles, letting his finger down.

"I thought you liked my mouth," I chide. He gets closer, his eyes dipping to my lips, and I swallow. He bows his head to press his forehead against me.

"Yes." He breathes. "Very much." His lips brush mine when something crawls on my skin, sending goosebumps jittering down my spine. I rip my

gaze from him to my arm and a frightened yelp escapes me.

“It’s just a spider,” he says, quickly scooping the bug that’s now fallen on my dress.

An air bubble gets caught in my throat and my head involuntarily turns away, aghast, and terrified to look.

Miranos laughs. “Maybe not so fearless after all. Spiders belong to the Fates, Ariane, they won’t let a spider hurt you.”

“Ha. Since when did the Fates ever care to spare someone from feeling hurt?”

He passes me a grim stare as he stands to set the spider loose on a leaf of the olive tree. “At least you have me to save you from terrifying little monsters.”

“My hero,” I mutter sardonically to which he guffaws. He sits closer and gently pushes me to lie down on the grass, his eyes twinkle as he stares down into my eyes. Just when I think he’s going to kiss me, he speaks.

“Just promise me you’ll be respectful of the Goddess Athena. Spreading rumors, it’s—dangerous. You saw what happened to Medusa.”

I sit up, forcing him to lean back, “What happened to Medusa was horrible and unjust. Which is partly the reason why I choose to worship no gods.”

Surprise flashes across his features. “The rules of the temple were clear, Ari. Chastity and purity when stepping inside. You heard the rumors; Medusa was tempting the Fates by luring Poisidon. Everyone said she flaunted—”

“She did no such thing.”

He stares at me blankly.

“Medusa loved Athena. She gave her life in servitude to the Goddess, she swore her chastity, and Poseidon forced himself upon her. Athena punished her for *his* wrongdoing.” Now my voice is rising. “Do you believe he is not to be punished because it is in his nature to take from a woman what he wants?”

His expression straightens as he fixes his gaze on mine, serious, and with intent; “I do not. And you know that I don’t. But, please, my love, heed my warnings, your tapestries are of great beauty, but you should weave olive trees and flowers, not spread rumors about the gods in your scenes.

"They're not rumors. they're the truth."

“Where is your proof of your claims? I fear Athena will curse you for this.”

A low sigh escapes me. I don’t have proof. I don’t know how I know these things, but different truths ache in my bones as they unfold within my gut. “How much do you trust me?” I answer his question with a question.

“With everything I’m made of.”

“Then believe me when I tell you, perhaps I do have a gift from the gods. The gift of knowing the truth. I swear it.”

He takes my hand in his and raises it to his lips. “Then I believe you.” his lips press gently down on my skin and it makes me yearn for his touch even more.

“You’re the only thing in this world I want, Ariane. We’re so close to being able to afford a place to call our own. Can you imagine it?”

I close my eyes and imagine us sitting in a garden, belonging only to us. A smile spreads on my lips and although my eyes are closed, I know he’s smiling, too. Betrothal comes to those who need legal bindings, but rarely do people in Colophon find love as great as ours, enough to make a life together in union.

“Then we lay low. We keep working as we do, and soon, we can be together always.”

Our lips crash against each other, and we fall into oblivion as Nyx cloaks the skies with her starlit blanket. The only thing that matters is us, and not even the gods can take it away from me.

CHAPTER 2

The soft morning light pours in from the window, the road outside is quiet, still early enough to avoid the business from the market that will soon fill the streets of Colophon. I tie up the final knots of my newest creation, stretched across my applewood loom. The nobleman who commissioned me for this piece wasn't specific in what he wanted, only that it was a gift for his wife who is a romantic. And so, I wove Eros spying upon Psyche as she struggled to win back his love by completing his mother's tests. The tapestry shows each scene as a story circling the grand middle where Eros and Psyche are in a passionate embrace, to be together forever. I even included some scenes no one knows about, one of which is Eros flying down to the underworld, keeping to the shadows, watching for Psyche's safety. Never being too far away, yet unnerved with himself for becoming angry with her when all she wanted to do was to gaze upon him.

The heavy wooden entrance to my store slides open, the hinges letting me know someone's here. I glance over to the nobleman who commissioned me for the piece, and I widen my smile. "All finished." A woodnymph I recognize as Damara, skirts inside from behind him. A scowl flashes across his face as she pushes past him, but it's quickly replaced by surprise at the appearance of a nymph in my store. I bite down a chuckle. Pointy ears poke from her golden locks as she prances over in a half-clad green dress.

She gapes at my loom, her bright-blonde curls falling over her sharp rosy cheeks. "Oh, Ariane, isn't this one the most beautiful you've created?" her voice is like a cloud if a cloud could speak, soft and serene.

“I don’t know,” I chide. “I’ve created so many, but… It is a sight, isn’t it?”

The nobleman approaches and clears his throat. His features are hard to read as he gazes upon the tapestry, but then his brow arches. “It’s breathtaking.” He quickly reaches in for his money to pay me. “I don’t know what I was expecting, young miss, but this— the rumors are true; your talent attracts even the nymphs to come into your shop,” he glances at Damara. “You have great talent. My wife is going to be so pleased.”

Loosening the tapestry, I work to get it wrapped up and ready for him to take home. “You’re too kind, but it is not talent I have, only practiced skill, and many nights of hard work.”

“And special sight,” the woodland nymph adds. I shoot her a hard stare, but she keeps going, pointing to the hidden secrets I know of Eros and Psyche. “Like this here,” she tilts her head at the nobleman. “Only Ariane would know this besides Eros and Psyche themselves.”

My breath hitches. “Damara, please—”

“Modest indeed,” Damara continues, “she does have talent. No one else knows that—”

“Damara!” I whisper shout.

The nobleman takes the tapestry in his hands but his eyes squint at me. “Are you a witch?”

“N-no!” I chuckle, trying to ease my nerves, and shoot Damara a nasty glare to which she blushes and steps back. “I’m no witch, but I have my sources. Some would prefer me more modest, but I see nothing wrong with being proud of my hard work.”

He smiles. “As you should be. Really clever artistry. Truly.”

After bidding him farewell, and watching him leave, I stare at the woodnymph. “Are you trying to anger the gods on my behalf? I don’t need them coming down here and thinking I have power—which I don’t!” I’m not trying to stir up strife with the gods publicly. I promised Miranos I would keep to myself.

“Sorry.”

My shoulders relax. “It’s all right.” As much as I appreciate the special attention of the nymphs due to them liking my tapestries, they don’t have a talent for keeping their mouths shut.

“But don’t you think you have some sort of power?” she says in one breath. “How else do you know such secrets?”

A sigh escapes my lips but I don’t answer her. My attention snaps to the door sliding open, letting in the sounds of hustle and bustle as the roads begin to fill in Colophon. Two ladies enter, one tall with curly, black hair, the other plumper with straight, brown hair. I tell them they can leave the door open. Now that my commissioned piece is with the nobleman, I want the city to know I’m open for business. The girls admire my tapestries hanging on my walls, with their eyes wide in adoration. Damara stays, prancing around my shop, and keeping me company while speaking to my customers. I start sorting through my threads, selecting white, blue, and gold for the next piece I want to create.

“Oh, hi, Isadora!” the nymph greets a young girl from the village known to be the baker’s daughter. She’s already catching the eye of many, with her rosy cheeks and beautiful golden-brown locks. I smile and greet her inside.

“What brings you to my shop?” I ask her.

Her green eyes are vibrant as they beam at me. “I took a break from the bakery and wanted to gaze upon your beautiful tapestries.”

“That is very kind of you,” I say. “Take your time, look around.”

She practically dances whimsically around the store, humming to herself.

“Enchanting that one, isn’t she?” Damara whispers, leaning her elbow on my table. “She’ll break many hearts,”

Isadora stares back at us. “How I wish I could create such beautiful tapestries like yours someday, and be adored by even the nymphs,” she stares up to the ceiling as if praying to the gods for it to happen.

“What would your father say?” Damara asks her, and Isadora frowns.

“That my duty is to bake. But how I would really rather learn to weave,” she cups her hands up to her cheeks. Damara arches her brows at me.

“Well,” Isadora and Damara stare at me, “I say you’re in charge of your own fate. If becoming a weaver is what your heart wants, then you’ll find a way.”

Isadora’s eyes twinkle. “Do you really think it possible?”

“Absolutely.”

A little while later, Isadora has gone, and a young boy walks in, carrying a basket in his arm. “Miranos told me to give this to you,” he says. Taking the basket, I offer him a smile and open the top to an assorted

selection of sweets: dates filled with honey cream, small fig cakes, along with pomegranate, and a jar with dried fruits and nuts. My cheeks warm, and Damara skips over to me, her eyes gushing at the contents. I take a fig cake and give it to the boy who brought me the basket. His eyes beam as he graciously takes it from me before he sets off for his duties.

“Oh, that Miranos loves you, Ari!” she gasps. “You’re so lucky!” I set the basket down, letting her choose the sweet she wants while plopping a fig cake in my mouth. Honey and cinnamon tickle my senses as the sweetness of the fig makes my eyes roll back.

“Mmmm. So good,” I say with a mouth full. Someone clears their throat and I stare down at an elderly woman with white hair pulled back into a bun; pronounced crow’s feet, and deep bags under her eyes tell her age. She’s hunched over a cane as she stares at the tapestries hanging from the ceiling.

“Apologies, ma’am. How may I help?”

“Did you weave all of these yourself?” she asks.

“Yes, I did.”

“So, the rumors are true.” her voice is frail and weak as her lazy eye wavers. “I’ve traveled a long way to lay my eyes upon the talented mortal who’s attracted noblemen and nymphs,” she passes a glance at Damara who sticks a date in her mouth, then gazes back at me. “You were gifted with impeccable talent. You must be filled with great thanks to your goddess Athena. May her protection over all weavers bring you solace.”

I can’t help my features twisting. “My goddess? I was not born with talent, I worked very hard for my skills. But I thank you for your admiration of my work.”

Damara swallows and tells me “Your embroidery perhaps may be even better than Athena’s. So many have come from afar to see your skill for themselves.”

I can’t help the prideful curl of my lip. “Perhaps.”

The crone’s eye twitches, and for a second, I swear she might hit me with her cane. “Be humble. Your skills might be superior to that of any mortal, but not of a goddess.”

I scoff. “I've studied much too hard and spent countless hours wearing out the skin of my fingertips for my hard work to be attributed to any goddess. What would Athena know about hard work, anyway?” The crone

stays silent, and I collect myself. “I’m sorry, was there something you’d like me to create for you?” Otherwise, she can move on.

The crone squints at me and leans in. “Are you not afraid Athena would scorn you and those you love for your arrogance?”

I hold back a sigh. “I don’t believe I’m being arrogant for believing in my own skill.”

More people walk inside the store, but my gaze doesn’t leave the crone’s hard stare. I know I should refrain from talking back to my elders, that I should compose myself more eloquently, but the hatred in her eyes makes my blood boil. Her look tells me she’s disgusted that I don’t thank the gods for being born, or for breathing the air. Why should I worship a goddess who punishes women who run to her temple to seek refuge? Or because she’s so jealous of a mortal’s beauty? What kind of god claims to be of service to mankind but then wants to be worshipped in return?

No. I owe no thanks to Athena for my skills. If anything, I shall thank my father for passing down his knowledge to me, and even then, he didn’t force me to practice all hours of the day.

The crone lifts her chin. “I would never buy a tapestry from an ungrateful peasant such as yourself. I’ll give you one last chance, and thank Athena in front of me for the beautiful gifts you’ve been granted. Say that it is because of her that you are so skilled, and nothing more.”

A laugh escapes the back of my throat. Is this old lady serious? I pass a look to Damara who’s been standing there quietly, her brows pinched. “What say you, Damara? Do you agree that I should bestow my thanks upon an absent goddess? Or perhaps *Athena and I* could give a contest a go?” I laugh harder, and now so do Damara and a few people who were listening inside the store. Expecting to see an awful look plastered on the crone’s face, I blink at the now creeping smile sliding upon the spiteful hag.

Smoke seeps out from the crone’s cloak, writhing to life as it twirls around her body, cocooning her in black-and-red smoke, but as quickly as it covers her, it quickly dissipates to reveal a tall and gorgeous woman, wearing loosely fit white drapes, tied with gold buckles at the shoulders and waist. I gasp.

“It’s Athena,” Damara states.

My blood grows cold, and my mouth dries as the Olympian Goddess reveals herself before my eyes. I nearly stumble over my feet, and I bow

my head, to show my respects. A cruel laugh leaves Athena’s lips, sending a cold shiver down my spine.

CHAPTER 3

"My, my, aren't you an arrogant mortal?" A soft, ethereal glow seems to emanate from Athena's skin, her dark eyes bore into me, her strong, muscular stature every bit as intimidating as they say she would be. The Goddess of war, wisdom, magic, and craft.

Athena is standing in my shop—the almighty daughter of Zeus.

And I've insulted her to her face.

"You mortals are all the same, thinking you are on the same level as the gods whenever gifted a bit of talent. Some humility would do you wonders."

"I-I'm sorry, I—" What do I even say? I'm expected to worship her, she'll surely make me suffer a cruel death for my defiance. "I didn't mean offense, Athena. I only meant that I've worked hard for my skills."

Athena has a permanent smirk on her face. "Save your pleas and consider your challenge accepted. If you win, you shall be gifted an honor of the gods, and you may carry out your talent. But if *I* win," her voice darkens. "Tapestries will be spun from the leavings of your skin and bones."

The blood drains from my face. She means to kill me and spin me as the thread for her own tapestries.

Athena turns to Damara. "Call upon all the nymphs to be the judge. The best tapestry wins." She pivots on her heel and heads for the exit. People scurry away to let her pass, mouths agape as she does. "Oh, and Ariane?"

I'm too much in shock to answer.

“You have three nights to prepare. Make it good, your life depends on it.”

MY FINGERS SHAKE. Is this really happening? Am I really going to compete against Athena in weaving? She’s the goddess of crafts, wisdom, and war… oh no, what have I done?

Tapestries will be spun from the leavings of your skin and bones.

As I walk down the dirt road, the hustle and bustle have significantly died down. Not because it’s late in the day and people are tired, but because the town is small, and word gets around fast. I keep my gaze fixed in front of me as whispers and stares follow me home.

Three days to practice creating the best tapestry I have ever made in my life, one that outshines any the world has ever seen. My skills are superior but to that of a goddess? It was just a foolish joke. If I were competing against any other weaver, I’d be confident in my abilities, but this is the Goddess of craft I’m up against.

The arid temperature sticks to my face as I reach the street where I live. Three women are conversing at the gated garden entrance in front of the row of houses facing the same direction. They stop talking and stare at me as I pass them by, ignoring even the statue of Athena that’s sitting in the center of the garden. The moment my back is to them they continue their chatter.

“Serves her right for thinking she’s better than a goddess.”

“Her father will be so disappointed.”

“Why can’t she just apologize?”

Keeping my mouth shut, I step inside the small mud house I live in with my father. The small space is divided into two parts, with one side being where I sleep, and the other where my father sleeps. He’ll be home soon from tending the sheep, so I work quickly to get dinner ready, allowing the mundane task to overpower the day, but it isn’t any use. Miranos won’t be able to sneak away from his barracks until later, and I’m going to have to tell him what happened.

After supper, my father sits with wrinkles of worry indenting his forehead as he weaves in his own loom. When night falls, he goes to sleep,

but I stare at the moon from the windowsill, contemplating the chatter of the day. Maybe I should go to Athena's temple tomorrow and apologize. Would she let this go?

Doubtful. Athena isn't known to be forgiving, and she's going to want to prove her craft is better than mine, and that I'm an inferior mortal who needs to be humbled. I ball my fists. Why couldn't I have just stayed quiet?

"Psst."

My brows perk up. "Miranos!" I whisper-shout. He smiles gallantly at me and I pass my father a look to make sure he doesn't wake. The sweet scent of the night-blooming jasmines surrounds us as I slip out of my house and fall into his arms. I wrap my arms tightly around him, and having him near brings the weight I bear to the forefront, wetting my eyes.

"Ari? What is it?" he lifts my chin with his index finger.

Letting out a long sigh, I take his hand and lead him to our favorite spot beneath the olive tree at the top of the hill. I tell him everything that happened during the day from the crone who stepped foot inside my shop, to the idiotic joke I told her. "And now I have to compete with Athena," my voice shakes. "How am I ever going to survive this?"

His face is pale as he stares at me.

"I know you want to tell me, "I told you so, just say it and get it over with."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "It was only a matter of time before word of your skill reached Mount Olympus," he whispers. "The gods see everything." I stare down at the ground. "But…" he takes my hand and I stare at him. His eyes are soft as he looks at me. "If you weren't attracting the attention of the Goddess of craft herself, you wouldn't be paving your way to immortality in your craft."

I huff under my breath. "Some good that's gotten me. Some of the chatter in town think I should try and lose on purpose."

"No. if she said she'll strip you of your skills, then rest assured that's what she'll do."

"Even still, her threats are commonly double-edged. I still need to be careful."

Miranos passes a hand over my hair, and I lean into his touch. "All you have to do, is play it safe. Weave something of beauty she's graced us with. An olive tree like I said before, or perhaps her owl. Weave a tapestry

about her impeccable beauty, make her enamored with your work—not because she'll think it's better, but because she'll see how you view her."

"Pompous and cruel?"

He quirks a brow expectantly.

My lips slant into a smile. "Strong and beautiful?"

"That's more like it." He plants a gentle kiss on my forehead.

"I'll try."

CHAPTER 4

The next day I close my shop to give myself time to practice and prepare. If anything, I won't have time until after the contest to work on a commission, that is if I'm still in one piece by then.

I get to weaving, letting myself get lost in the serene motions I find so hypnotic as soon as I find my rhythm. As my fingers dance across the loom, I focus on the image I want to create. Athena is in front of an olive tree, with an owl flying beside her. I'll weave in a night sky as well, to bring in a sensual undertone. It'll be beautiful, a bit meaningless, but pretty and meaningless is what I'm going for. Of course, this is only practice, and I'll have to create a tapestry in front of the judges on the day. But at least, I'll know what I'll be designing so as to get through it quickly and flawlessly. Hmm. Maybe I can do this.

Something pricks my finger and I gape at the drop of blood on my index. Staring at the threads, I can't see what could have done it. Perhaps my fingers are tired? But this hasn't happened before, and I've woven past the sense of exhaustion. I shake it off and continue weaving until— "Ow!"

I gasp.

Blood oozes from my fingertips over the white and pale blue threads. An anvil lands in my stomach, I've bled over my design and now I have to start over. Standing, I search the floor for any semblance of what could be cutting me. When I don't find anything, I wipe my hands on a damp cloth and get back to work. I'll most likely not keep this anyway, but perhaps I can wash it after I'm done. There's no sense in throwing it out and starting anew, that would be wasteful, and this is just practice. I continue with my

weaving, tying tiny knots, and weaving patterns until the hypnotism from the rhythm engulfs me once again.

But as I continue, my fingers start to ache. The cutting hasn't stopped, and the blood keeps flowing, ruining my design. I frown but keep going. In such a hypnotic state, it's difficult to stop now anyway. So, I weave through the pain, allowing the blood to flow freely from my hands; tears brim my eyes and fall down my cheeks.

The pain becomes unbearable and I urge myself to stop, but can't. My breath catches in my throat and I try to pull my hands away, I try to stand but nothing I do allows me to stop weaving. What magic is this? This must be Athena's doing!

A small spider crawls from between the fabric and I gape as I watch it crawl to my fingers, its long legs making my skin crawl as it walks, its beady, plentiful eyes staring at me mockingly, knowing I can't move. Every fiber of my being cries out in trepidation as it makes its way to my fingertips and bites me. "N-no!" This takes me out of my trance and I fall backward, causing my oil lamp to tip over and catch the bottom of the tapestry aflame.

Quickly, I grab a pail of water from the back of my shop and pour it over the fire. The most important thing is to save my loom. I pant as smoke settles from the flames.

All this time there were small spiders biting at my fingertips and I hadn't noticed. But why were they here? I stare at the half-burnt tapestry. I had gotten all the way up to the night sky as I tied in gold threads to create dazzling stars. Now half of it is burnt and wet, and ruined.

I fall to my knees and let myself weep.

The next day, I clear out my entire shop and scrub the walls and floor with vinegar, before burning frankincense to clear away the putrid smell. Now, no spiders will be able to get to me.

Chatter comes from outside my shop and I ball my fist.

"Frankincense? She must have given up and started praying to the gods." A few snickers follow.

Don't people have anything better to do?

Ignoring them, I pick myself up from the floor and sit down at my loom. Having pre-selected the same colors I used yesterday, I start on the same design, intent on getting it right, and even better than before.

Almost instantly, I fall into a hypnotic trance as I weave in the colors of the scene. My fingers start to prickle in pain, and droplets of blood coat the threads, my pulse quickens as my eyes skim the entire loom for spiders, unable to stop weaving. As I try to pull away, my fingers grow tired, and for a split second, I give up.

What's the use? Why even bother? Clearly, there's some divine intervention at work to keep me from practicing. And yet—despite my efforts at giving up, my fingers still work as if they're in a trance of their own. Curious, I let them, allowing my mind to drift away from the scene I was trying to accomplish to be replaced with a familiar feeling sprouting in my mind—no deeper than that, in my heart.

I allow my hands to dance rhythmically as I pull out different colors, adding them to my image, tying knots, and working different patterns. When finished, my hands ache, but my heart is full, as I complete a tapestry from my heart, letting go of the scene I was trying to make. Standing for a better view, I grab the oil lantern beside me as night has fallen and hold the light to the tapestry. I gasp at the picture.

It's of Athena, undressed and bathing in a spring. A man is attempting to flee away from her as he accidentally stumbled upon her naked. Athena has an angered look on her face, and sparkling threads mimic her enchantment as she casts a curse toward him. In the next scene, he's shown with his eyes sewn shut, now permanently blind due to Athena's wrath.

I stumble back and cup my mouth with a hand while setting the oil lamp down on the table. This is not what I was meant to do. Athena would be revolted by not only the declaration of her wrath over a mistake but of how I came by this knowledge. Something I'm still not aware of myself.

She'd sooner kill me than only strip me of my skill.

I've utterly doomed myself, but one thing I think I know is… the spiders have gone after I used my skill.

CHAPTER 5

"Well, it certainly is magnificent."

I scowl at him.

"The tapestry, I'm not looking at Athena, my love. Sometimes, it's as if the images in your designs move when telling a story."

"Yes, well, it isn't going to help me now, is it?"

His hands form fists around the tapestry and he shakes his head. "I fear what will happen tomorrow and I will not be there for you."

Placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, he glances at me with worried features. "Don't worry, my love," I tell him. "I know you cannot get away from your duties, I'd rather you not miss training than be sentenced to death for sneaking off to witness a contest I brought upon myself."

"I'll never forgive myself if I never see you again," he says.

Silence blooms between us. I want to tell him all will be all right, that I will figure it out and somehow come out of the contest unscathed, but I'm not sure I'd believe it myself, and couldn't bear the taste of the lie on my tongue. I could never lie to Miranos. Instead, I say "So long as I have your love and support in spirit, I will feel protected during my dueling."

"Then in spirit, I will never leave your side." He drops the tapestry on the ground and picks up my hands to inspect them. I had spent the day soaking them to replenish my skin. I decided it would be a wasted effort to practice today with my fingers sore, and incapable of creating what would make Athena happy. Better to rest up today and be ready for tomorrow.

He knits his brows together. “There certainly is some kind of sorcery behind this.”

“It’s like I’m forced to reveal the dark truths of the gods. But, Miranos, while I do it… It feels—I can’t even describe it. It feels as though divinity is flowing through me and into the wool.”

“It’s going to get you killed, Ari.”

“So, what am I to do? Tomorrow, I face Athena. And whether we want it or not, I have to compete with my best work, or I’ll surely not have a chance at keeping my skills.”

Miranos slides a strand of hair from my face behind my ear. “Perhaps, you have to weave through the pain just to create the portrait that will make you win.”

I suck in a breath. “But I feel that goes against my being… if I felt pain when I refused to create my heart's desire…”

“Just this once. If not only to save your life, do it for us so we can be together without worry.”

Letting out a slow sigh, I gaze into his eyes and offer him a slight nod. “You’re right. Just this once, for the contest.”

Relief crosses his features, and he leans down and kisses me.

DRESSED in my finest purple linens, my stomach buzzes with anticipation, and the dirt road to my shop never felt shorter. It’s not like I can delay the inevitable. Miranos’s words from last night echo in my thoughts.

Weave through the pain just to create the portrait that will make you win.

For us so we can be together without worry.

I want to. I want so badly to do as he says, get this over with, and live to see another day, so he and I can live together happily, and in peace.

I can do this.

Boisterous chatter comes from the village center, and I pause at its entrance. An audience of people has gathered to witness Athena in all of her godly glory making an example of the mortal who insulted her. Baskets upon baskets of offerings, along with *amphorae* carrying oils and spices decorate the area to honor her arrival. Two looms are laid out side

by side on top of a stage, in front of our village fountain, not twenty feet from my shop.

No sign of the Goddess yet. I swallow. A greater fool has never lived.

The nymphs are starting to come in, taking their seats close to the looms. I spot Damara—wearing a flowing, green dress—whispering something to a friend of hers. She spots me looking at her and she waves. I wave back, and she's already making her way over.

"Hi, Damara," I say, making my way to my shop as she follows.

"Did you hear the rumors about Isadora?"

I quirk a brow. The baker's daughter? "I've been a bit preoccupied with my contest. What rumors?"

Damara's cheeks redden, she looks behind her and pushes the sliding door to my shop open, pulling me inside. My stomach twists. Athena will be here any minute, and I really wanted some time to gather my thoughts, alone. But, by the manner Damara is acting, something terrible must have happened.

"Damara, what is it?" I close the shop door behind us, and the light pours in from the two windows, lighting the room.

"She got into a terrible fight with her father over wanting to be a weaver. He said no, and so she turned to Athena's temple and pledged herself to the Goddess. She said as long as she has Athena to protect her, her father wouldn't object, as Athena protects the weavers."

"That's hardly a terrible thing—"

"She was found unclothed behind some hedges outside of Athena's temple. She claims to not have ever made it in, but when questioned, her eyes shed tears, and she'd refuse to answer."

My cheeks are burning, my fists are balled. "N-no.."

The sea nymphs say they witnessed a man grabbing her and—"

I look away, my eyes squeezing shut. This can't be. Not Isadora. "They don't know who grabbed her?" I was the one who gave her the notion to find a way to become a weaver… this is all my fault.

"None of the sea-nymphs recognized the god, for he shapeshifted into a vulture and flew away when he was done. She's so afraid of what the village might do to her if she admits what happened, but I fear the rumors have already spread. Her father sent a search for her last night, I'm surprised you didn't hear anything."

I shake my head. “I was too preoccupied with how to win today.” I should have been there for Isadora, instead of trying to convince myself to be untruthful to my purpose. My heart fills with regret as I stare at Damara. “Won't there be a goddess who can protect her?”

“You know how Athena feels about chastity at her temple. Even though she didn’t make it inside, Athena will never take her now. And people are already starting to say Isadora was too flaunting of her beauty…”

I chew on my cheek. My heart feels hollow, how can I weave like this now?

“Oh, I’m so sorry Ariane, I shouldn’t burden you with this. You need to be resting your mind before your contest.”

“It’s all right.” I wave my hand in front of me. “I suppose I needed the distraction. I need only to collect my wool.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” She stares at me with her forest-green, nymph eyes, then she pulls me into an embrace. “Good luck, friend.”

“Thank you.” I watch her step out of my shop and shut the door.

With a heavy heart, I turn to start collecting colors. An array of blues and silver for the night sky, Dark and light brown, and greens for the olive tree. Where did I put the white?

My eyes skim past my neatly assorted threads, hoping I haven’t run out. With all the commotion, I didn’t even think to dye new threads, and my father had just finished with the newest wool. My gaze stops at a basket by the windowsill. That’s curious, who put that there?

Uncovering a black cloth covering the contents, I gasp at what’s inside. Beautiful silks of all colors, from dark purple, to beige and white. Who could have opened my shop and brought this? A flutter warms my heart.

Miranos.

It had to have been him, and it must have cost him a fortune.

Get through this, and we can be together.

Passing my fingers over the soft silk threads, I smile sadly.

Outside, the crowd quiets, and my pulse quickens. She’s here. Not soon after, a flute starts to play, to greet the Goddess’s arrival. With the basket in hand, I steel my spine and head outside.

Athena stands on top of the stage, staring at everyone in the audience, smiling and waving. She wears her traditional helmet and holds a spear in her right hand, her white robes are casually held by gold cuffs on her

shoulders and waist. Her gaze stops on mine and she has a smug look on her face.

“Are you ready to be humbled, mortal?”

I purse my lips and walk up to the stage. *Be respectful, Ariane. You can do this.*

Once on the stage, I stare at the crowd around me. Damara beams and waves, I offer her a soft smile. She might have a big mouth, but she’s proud of the work I’ve done, and I know she wants me to best Athena.

“Time is of the essence, Ariane,” Athena’s voice is sharp and brisk. “Take your seat.” She stares at the nymphs and points to Damara. “Not you. I won’t have you swaying the rest of the judges.”

Damara’s eyes widen and she scurries away from the rest.

I take my seat on the stool in front of my loom and wait for Athena’s command to begin weaving.

CHAPTER 6

My stomach hurts at the thought of me going against my being. Being honest about what I know is who I am, and I hate knowing that others have suffered, and have been punished for the abuse of the gods. That there are people who have died unjustly and cruelly when they were wronged.

I stare at the silks in my basket, still unsure of what to create and which colors to choose. Athena has already begun weaving beside me, and the audience is silently inspecting us. I feel everyone's stares burning into my back as I sit here not having started yet. Whispers start to spread behind me and I know they're wondering what I'm doing. I didn't notice if Isadora was among the crowd, I'd imagine she was hiding at home to not showcase her bruises.

An image of her frail body being covered with bruises, and being abused comes to mind, and my stomach twists.

If it really was a god who did it…

What's the use? There wouldn't be any proof and neither Zeus nor Athena would punish a god for what they deem is in their nature. Everyone thinks Medusa deserved it for being provocative…but I know the truth.

I begin to select the colors blue and white.

And now poor Isadora will have to suffer in silence lest she be shunned or suffer the wrath of the gods.

I start to weave the silk threads into the loom, and I get to work. My mind drifts to unjust, terrible things as my fingers dance across the beginnings of the tapestry. This time, no pain befalls my hands and the silk is the softest I've ever used before.

My vision zooms me into my work, and I'm able to block out Athena working next to me, I can't even hear chatter from the crowd anymore. It's just me, and this loom. As the hours go by, and the sun meets the height of the sky and then dips to the mountains, my heart soars as I give myself to my work completely. I no longer care what Athena will think of my chosen design, no longer worried about what the outcome will be.

My design is like a song that wants to be sung and only I can hear it in my heart until the whole story is finished on the tapestry.

Miranos will understand. He told me once that spiders belong to the Fates.

I didn't understand before when the spider was biting me. I had an inclination, but now I understand fully. If I'm to go against my being to appease others, I'm fighting my fate of being my true self. But if I reveal the truth for the purpose of protecting those who can't speak for themselves, I won't be bitten, a message from the fates that I'm on the right path. At least, that is what I'm coming to believe.

Besides, my tapestry might offend, but the judges are selecting the best weaving as the winner.

I just hope that it is the best one.

I select silver, gold, and white to create a dazzling effect for the ripples of water, and the stars in the sky. When I'm finished, the image almost seems to come to life on its own, and I stand to appreciate my hard work.

Athena stands as well.

The six nymphs in the audience climb onto the top of the stage. I gaze around the crowd, my eyes stopping at Damara who smiles at me. Others seemed to have left for supper, while a few are still there, others coming back. My heart skips a beat, hoping that maybe Miranos was able to escape training and at least make it to the end of my contest, but when I don't see him, I shake away my hopes and turn back to my tapestry.

Athena's face is red, and she shoots daggers in my direction. She grabs her spear and I take a shaking step back.

The nymphs glare at her tapestry first, taking in the design. In its center, a breathtaking image of Athena stands in front of the Parthenon. She's woven gorgeous shades of silver and blues, in contrast with the streaks of gold and auburn of her hair. The weaving of her face is flawless, and it's almost as if she sways in the tapestry, coming to life. There are smaller images surrounding the central one. Wins and creations from

Athena, the olive tree, the owl, the flute, as well as beautiful landscapes behind each picture. I admit, it's exquisite and serene.

Mine has a similar effect, as the nymphs move over to mine. They gasp in unison. Athena has still not yet spoken a word; she must be waiting for the result of the judges first.

I gaze upon my work as the nymphs take it in. At the center of the tapestry, are three large images side by side. And they tell the story of Medusa, but in a way that shows how unjust Athena was to her. On the right, Poseidon is there pushing Medusa down inside of the temple, showcasing Medusa being in pain and struggling. It's a ghastly and terrible sight. To the left, is Medusa being covered up, and avoiding the glares of men as she pronounces her vow of chastity to the Temple of Athena, and in the middle, shows Athena with a mocking smile, casting her curse on Medusa.

But I didn't stop there.

Along the edges, in smaller pictures, I added images that mock the gods, revealing their secrets of weakness and fears, so that everyone knows the gods are no better than any mortal as they are fallible, and can be as monstrous as man.

The nymphs take a closer look at my tapestry, their noses close to the silk threads. They do the same to Athena's tapestry.

Then one speaks. "There is no doubt, Ariane's tapestry is far superior to Athena's." The nymph turns to look at the goddess. "No doubt grotesque, but the weaving is better. Ariane wins."

The crowd gasps and my breath escapes me. My hands grow clammy as I stare at the Goddess whose face has gone rigid, and she looks like she wants to kill me.

Athena takes a step forward. "Now hear this." Everyone grows quiet. "I agree with the nymphs."

All the saliva gets absorbed on my tongue.

"Although grotesque, it is the finest work." Her eyes narrow and she keeps walking toward me on the stage. My feet don't budge. I don't think I could run from her if I tried. "But your lies will not go unpunished."

"They're not lies," I blurt.

Athena lifts her chin, and I recognize the jealous gleam in her eyes. She'd never allow a mortal to be better than her.

“Since you want to spin better than a god, you shall have it.” She lifts a finger, and her eyes sparkle something mischievous. “From this day forward, you shall be called Arachne, and you will fulfill the task that suits you so well. For each truth you think you know, you’ll have an eye, and you’ll never tire of spinning for you’ll have an extra arm to aid you. As will your offspring be forever cursed.”

My brows knit together. “What—Oh-owww!” Pain sears through my bones as a shattering rip thunders from my back, and my torso twists backward. My shoulders pop out of their sockets, and my knees crack as my bones penetrate out of my skin. Finally, I drop to the ground, as my bones break in different directions.

“What’s happening to me?” I ask between retched breaths.

Maniacal laughter permeates the air, while Athena twirls her finger in front of me as my body convulses, and shrivels as she casts her spell. More and more, the voices and screams grow louder, and everything gets bigger before my eyes. I start to scream through the pain, and for an instant, I’m uncertain if I’m screaming because it hurts, or because I’m now surrounded by giants.

Then, the screaming stops. Athena stops laughing and bends down to inspect me. I gape at her giant form. She steps forward, and I run backward, stumbling over my two…three…four…oh no. Eight feet.

CHAPTER 7

Miranos stares out toward the city of Colophon and gazes at the tall Ionioan columns of the Athenian temple. I sit on a branch of our olive tree, unknown to him that I watch him, as I'm unable to speak. He knows not what happened to me, only that I was cursed by Athena, and then disappeared.

Days have passed, and he mourns me every day. I watch as he brings food to my father, and has helped him with the sheep. When Athena cursed me, I never thought watching Miranos would be the hardest thing I'd ever endure.

Some claim to have seen me turn into a spider, but others say she killed me and made me disappear. He doesn't know which to believe, but I've watched him try to look for spiders. I've wanted to go up to him, but I'm ashamed. Would he even know it was me?

I wouldn't know it was me, and I refuse to gaze upon my own reflection. I wouldn't be able to stand the sight of me. Someday, I'll make myself known to Miranos, but for now, I'll wait until the time is right.

If only I'd listened to him, and given up making tapestries altogether. All I had to do was not upset Athena, and let her win. I could be living with the love of my life on our farm, but I had to win and prove to be the best.

Miranos turns to leave, and I wrap a web around the branch to get ready to swing, to follow him. I'll never leave his side.

"Let him go, Arachne." A woman's voice comes from behind me, and I turn to it. "He is no longer your path," the woman says. She's with two

others who look similar, I can tell they're all sisters. An ethereal glow encompasses them all.

"Yes, come with us," the youngest says.

Keeping an eye on Miranos, I inspect the three sisters with the rest of my eyes. They each have on robes that match the starlight, with delicate spiderwebs decorating the fabric. "Who are you?" I ask.

The oldest responds "We are the Fates, dear. Worry not, he cannot see or hear us."

A small gasp escapes me. Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos are standing in front of me, *talking* to me. I grew up being told, horrible, frightening tales about them. Even Zeus has great respect for and fears them. "But I can't leave him." A sob escapes the back of my throat.

Clotho, the middle-aged one walks in front of the others to come closer to me. She pulls a string and measures it with her hands for me to see. It sparkles under the moonlight. "You see, as one's threads are pulled, and changed, so is their life. Miranos is no longer your future."

"Instead," Atropos, the eldest now moves forward. "Your future is with us."

"Think of it, as a new beginning," now Lachesis is the one to speak, her voice is soft and lighter than the other sisters. "Atropos could have ended your future, but instead we convened, and decided to adopt you."

"Adopt me? But, if you can change my fate, can't you change me back to a woman?"

Atropos's face is apologetic. They're not nearly as frightening as the stories tell. "Perhaps you will learn to change yourself back, but we cannot do it for you. You caused your own fate, not us."

"We merely observe, and try as though we might to guide mortals in the right directions, the choice is always yours," Lachesis says. "You made the right choice listening to the spiders, and accepting the silken threads, now you can lead an immortal life, and stand up for those who suffer unjustly."

I stare at Lachesis. "*You* left me the silk?" I thought it was Miranos. All three of them nod.

"However," Lachesis says. "Spiders belong to us, as they weave the intricacies of their webs, that match the beauty, and the death of the universe. Without us, your children will be spiderlings, and will never

become human, and that interferes with Miranos's fate, so we had to intervene and adopt you."

"Yes," Atropos agrees. "I have seen the future, and this is what must be. We will teach you our magic, and your children will grow up to leave this world and enter another. They will carry on the powers of Fate onto their new world."

I stare, aghast and unbelieving. "No—" I look behind me, Miranos is already walking away. Can I really leave him forever and go with the Fates, to never return? "Wait—my children?"

"You are with child," Lachesis says.

"Let him go," Clotho holds her palm out to me. "And learn to weave the tapestries of life."

I stare at her palm. "I don't think I ever *can* let him go…what will I possibly do without him?"

"My dear Arachne, you will spend your days spinning your tapestries upon your web, and you'll weave a passage where the gods will one day meet their demise."

A smile tugs within me. I turn and watch Miranos walking farther and farther away. As much as it hurts, the sins and the secrets of the gods shall be judged. And I will be the one to show them.

BLOOD SACRIFICE

THE ATLIS CHRONICLES

KRYS FENNER

As the last surviving Atlis, Thalasia can’t run from her duties any longer.

CHAPTER 1

Thalasia tucked a loose strand of her oxford blue hair behind her ear as she glanced over her shoulder. That dark-haired man was still behind her. Was he following her, or was it just a coincidence? He'd appeared on the wooded trail behind her on the other side of the market, and hadn't turned off anywhere since she'd gotten here. But that didn't mean he was after her or the object in her possession. No one knew what she'd retrieved for the shaman. Hell, she didn't even know. It looked like a golden scroll with a bunch of gibberish, or at least a lot of symbols she didn't understand. Not that it mattered. Especially if she wanted to get paid.

And she needed the money.

Which meant she had to lose this guy. Better to be on the safe side. Besides, this was the human world, it was best she didn't draw any attention to herself. Though she kind of itched for a fight. Maybe if she got somewhere secluded…then she could *really* handle the situation.

Scanning the street, she searched over the open stores and various vendors. There were a couple of people selling fruit and other produce, a few with fish stalls, and a guy wheeling a barrel of flowers from a nearby alley. That was her escape route. It wasn't private by any means, but it would work.

Quickening her pace, Thalasia darted in and out of the crowd. She peered back over her shoulder just as the dark-haired male strode a little faster through the throng of people. Her heart thundered beneath her chest. *Shit!* She couldn't go invisible yet and with the number of humans around, fighting wasn't the best option. It left her with only one other choice.

Letting out a low whistle, she conjured up a small gust of wind. Nothing out of the ordinary, just enough to knock over a few pieces of fish. She glimpsed the male; his attention fell to the situation as the owner ran into the road and cleaned up the mess. Thalasia ducked down and crawled around to the back of the closest stall, startling a blue-eyed male on the other side. She pressed a finger to her lips and silently mouthed, “Please.”

Goddess, she couldn’t do anything to manipulate the human. Not without giving away her position. She prayed this guy didn’t say anything. *Please, Demeter. Let this work.*

With a slight dip of his chin, the male flashed a toothy smile at the next customer who approached. “How can I help you?”

Thank the goddess for small favors, Thalasia thought to herself. She’d wait out her hunter. Hopefully, it wouldn’t take long for him to get far enough away that she could leave. She’d glamour if she could, blend in with the stall, but magic like that would cause a scene. And there was no telling if the person chasing her possessed his own kind of power. He could be human for all she knew.

Not that it would make much sense. The shaman who’d contracted her to hunt this scroll down had known she wasn’t human. While he hadn’t guessed everything, he’d figured out enough. Now, she just had to get back to his shop. In one piece.

“Thank you. Come again,” the blue-eyed man replied as he held out a white package.

“Excuse me,” a male said. “My niece got away from me and I’m just trying to find her. Have you seen a young girl with blue hair run past here?”

Thalasia stiffened, pressing her back more against the stall. Her eyes widened a touch. Fuck. This guy really had followed her. Who the fuck was he?

“No, sorry. Can’t say that I have.”

“Are you sure? She’s about…yay tall and has bright silver eyes.”

“I’m certain.” Her savior grinned. “Now, excuse me, but I have a customer.” His attention shifted to another person, and he uttered something in a foreign language.

Although she’d spent most of the last year in the human world, she hadn’t learned any of their tongues. The ones she knew weren’t of this world. Thalasia flicked her gaze as someone huffed and walked away from

the stall. It sounded like her stalker, but she didn't budge. Tucking her knees against her chest, she listened in on her savior's exchange. Not that she understood a single word, but it was better to focus on him than her erratic heartbeat. Or how her lungs constricted inside her chest. Fuck. What if *he* hadn't left? What if he hung around and waited?

The blue-eyed stranger bent down and retrieved two sheets of white paper. "I still see him, so stay put," he whispered. The male straightened, filled the sheets with three pieces of fish, and concluded his transaction.

Thalasia nodded and blew out a silent sigh of relief. Gods, she could breathe. While she wasn't safe yet, at least this guy had helped her out. Which meant freedom couldn't be too far around the corner. She'd get the scroll to the shaman, collect her fee, and leave this town. As much as she liked Japan, it might be time to jump to another realm and leave the human world behind.

Her rescuer crouched down on his haunches and dug around in a cabinet. "Do you know this man?"

"No," she replied, keeping her voice low. Though the surrounding din likely covered their exchange, she refused to chance it.

"Where are your parents?"

"I'm alone," Thalasia muttered. It was the last thing she wished to admit, but it was the truth. Not that she wanted to think about that, or how it had all happened.

"Oh…well, um, I'm Bayani and I'll keep you safe. Just…" his words trailed off as he lifted his gaze and surveyed the market. "I don't see him, but wait a little longer. Okay?"

"Yeah," she mumbled.

With a dip of his chin, he rose to his feet and returned to his task. She paid it little attention. Yeah, she was a twelve-year-old out in the world on her own, but so what? She wouldn't feel sorry for herself. Things had happened and no one could change them. All she could do now was focus on her survival. That was what mattered the most.

THALASIA PRESSED her shoulder against the heavy oak door and gave it a good shove. It opened with a slight hiss as the bell above it rang. Her

eyebrows furrowed as she flicked her gaze from the door to the store itself. She didn't recall it taking so much effort the first time. A chill swept down her spine. Shaking the sensation off, Thalasia shut the door. The bell sounded again, ringing loudly in her ears. Ensuring there were no interruptions while she conducted the last of their business, she locked the door and flipped the sign.

Whether the shaman knew it, he was temporarily closed. Thalasia surveyed the store, glossing over the various earmarked books, herbs, and other miscellaneous items. "Ayumu," she called out as she stepped farther into the shop. Although she didn't see him, the magician had to be around somewhere. Or maybe he was a warlock. She wasn't positive.

"I see you have returned safely, Miss Thalasia."

"Fuck!" She jumped back and eyed the dark-skinned, bald-headed magic wielder. Where the fuck had he just come from? Because he sure as shit wasn't there a second ago.

"Such colorful language in such a young girl." He clasped his hands behind him and strolled toward the counter.

"I don't recall my age being an issue when you sent me on that quest," she retorted as she trailed behind him. It shouldn't matter at all, really, though someone always had some kind of comment about it. So what if she was a kid? She got things done.

"Does this mean you have retrieved the scroll?"

His response and lack of valid concern didn't surprise her. Dragging her fingers through her blue locks, she dropped a hand to her hip, swallowed the groan on the tip of her tongue, and let out an exasperated sigh. "Yeah. And you should pay me extra. Apparently, you weren't the only one after it."

"Oh?" He cocked a dark eyebrow at her. "Did you have difficulty obtaining it?"

"No. But I had someone following me through the market. And he got pretty close." And if it hadn't been for Bayani, he might have caught her. Not that she mentioned that. It didn't seem all that important. Plus, she didn't want anything to come back on her rescuer.

"As you obviously escaped him, it seems you are worth your fare." One corner of his mouth quirked up. Ayumu stepped around the counter and his golden eyes focused on her. "Now come, show me the scroll."

“Money first.” She’d learned the hard way to see payment before she handed over the item in question. One person had the audacity to run off with said treasure. He hadn’t gotten far, but she hated having to hurt the guy. As she didn’t know what kind of magic this male possessed, it was better if she avoided a fight.

Ayumu balled up his fist and then opened up his hand. A small blue pouch rested against the ball of his large palm. “Your turn, Miss Thalasia.”

Yep, definitely a sorcerer. While she had her own magic that she could’ve hidden the scroll in, simple worked best. Thalasia untied the purple velvet pouch she had attached to the belt loop of her jeans. It didn’t look like anything other than a small purse. An extension charm worked wonders on something so common. She dug into it, retrieved the golden case he’d sent her to find, and held it out. “As promised.”

“Set it on the counter and you may collect your fee.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. Why wouldn’t he just take it from her hand? Whatever. He was paying her, so it didn’t matter if he was a little eccentric. She placed the kaleidoscope-sized case on the counter, picked up the blue pouch, and checked it to verify he’d filled it. The pouch contained a multitude of beautiful gold coins, along with a couple rubies and emeralds. She grinned. “It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Yes, it was,” he replied as he opened the case and removed a yellowed, rolled-up piece of parchment. “If you require more funds, there might be something else you can handle for me.”

Thalasia tucked her payment into her purse, attached it to her belt loop, and strode over to a nearby case. “As intriguing as that sounds, I think it’s time I depart this town.”

“Oh?” Ayumu lifted the scroll above his head. A large, black-feathered owl swooped through the air and snatched the paper from his hand.

What the fuck? Where had that thing come from? She scanned the rafters. Where had it gone? A shiver shot down her spine and a sharp pain radiated from the base of her skull to the front of her head. *Shit!* Her mind opened as a vision flooded her brain.

The little Seelie girl stepped back. Her dirty, cinnamon-colored hair hung back over her shoulders, caked with mud. Her round, hazel eyes widened as she whimpered, “Please…don’t hurt me.”

Taking another step back, she tripped over a bloody limb torn from its body. The little girl shrieked and scrambled backward until she hit a

nearby hut. She pressed her back against the wall, drew her legs close to her body, and pleaded, "Please…please, don't hurt me."

Tears trickled down the little girl's swollen cheeks. "Please," she cried. The distance between them closed. "No!" the girl screamed.

Gasping for air, Thalasia fell backward. As she landed on her butt, she bumped into the bookcase next to her and knocked over a crystal ball. It rolled a couple of feet and stopped. "No," she muttered. This wasn't happening. Except she couldn't deny what she'd just seen, though she refused to respond. The gods or goddesses…whoever sent them couldn't make her.

"Thalasia?" Ayumu's eyebrows furrowed.

Her gaze flicked from the shaman to the crystal ball. She caught her reflection in it. A pair of deep set, bright silver eyes and an ashen face stared back at her. Not again. She hadn't had a vision in months. They were supposed to be gone. They couldn't have returned. "No!" Thalasia clambered to her feet and ran as if her life depended on it. Maybe it wouldn't help her escape the vision, but maybe it would. The only way she'd find out was if she tried.

She flicked her wrist, unlocked and opened the door, and darted out of the store. Leaving it all in her wake, she rounded the corner and shot into the crowd. Her feet pounded against the pavement as she hoofed it as far away as she could get. She had to escape these visions.

They had already cost her too much.

There wasn't anything left for her to give.

Not even her heart.

CHAPTER 2

Thalasia glanced at the loud drunkards gathered at the bar from her corner booth. It seemed a little early for anyone to be so raucous, but as long as they didn't bother her, she didn't care. Instead, she focused on the remnants of her dinner as the earlier event replayed in her mind.

Rounding the corner, Thalasia skidded to a stop and bent over as she desperately tried to catch her breath. She crouched down, dug her elbows into her knees, and shoved her hands into her hair. They were gone. The visions were gone. Not one had popped up since… NO! She couldn't think about that. But no matter how hard she tried to keep it at bay, the memory danced across her brain like a forgotten lullaby.

"Run," Klaus ordered. "You need to run!"

"No! I can't! I won't leave you behind." She couldn't do this again. Leave another person, only to lose them. Because that's what would happen. She could feel it in her bones. Mistress was coming and he couldn't fight alone.

"You must." He removed something from the pocket of his pants and tucked the cool, glowing metal into her palm. "Take this. As long as you have it, I can find you. But you must go, Thalasia. You're the future. Now go! Fly to the jump-point and don't look back."

Clutching the radiant token tight in her hand, she threw her arms around him. "Thank you. For everything." He'd gotten her out of there, saved her life. And he was doing it again. Releasing the hug, she nodded once to him and took off into the air. Once again, leaving someone she cared about behind.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. With the back of her knuckles, Thalasia quickly brushed them off. This wasn't the time or place for crying.

"You okay?" the server asked as she poured more water into the cup.

"I'm fine," Thalasia declared. Her wellbeing didn't concern the woman. "Just get me the check."

"You don't look it, but I go with what you say." The server set a piece of parchment down with some numbers scribbled on it. "I come back."

Despite the female's thick accent, she understood all of it. At least until the server hollered something at the barkeep. Gods, she should've learned some of the language here. Thalasia eyed the total amount due on the paper. Another thing she should've figured out by now. How to convert their monetary values to gold. Lifting the cup to her lips, she took a big gulp of water and dug into her purse. She laid five gold coins on the table, rose to her feet, and headed for the door.

It was time to blow this realm. Not that she knew where to go next. Maybe if she consulted the book…no, that could be dangerous. She'd already had one vision, it could easily trigger another. Thalasia exited the building and stepped into a back alley. The stench of day-old garbage tickled her nose. Nothing like the pungent smell of urine to wake up the senses. But she'd take it over the sweet scent of bread or fruit. In the human world, anyway. Places like this dive didn't ask questions.

Of all the species she'd ever encountered, humans were the nosiest. Though it was easier to blend in with them. She only had to glamour her wings. Thalasia shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans and strolled toward the street ahead. As much as she wanted to find an inn for the night, the forest might offer her better protection. And she'd be close to the jump-point.

Behind her, a door creaked open and shut. She glanced over her shoulder and noticed a group of young men leave the restaurant. They started in her direction, and a chill shot down her spine. No reason for her to read anything into it. People often left places and walked the same path as others. It didn't mean they were following her, even if they were the drunkards she'd seen at dinner.

Shaking the sensation off, she focused on where she was going but kept her senses heightened. Best to be prepared. Just in case, she picked up her pace.

Their steps echoed against the pavement as the three males walked faster. “Hey, girl,” one called out. “Where are your parents?”

“Not safe for someone so young to be out here alone,” another stated.

Shit. They were following her. How the fuck was she going to get out of this? Maybe if she pretended they weren’t there, then they’d go away. Ignoring them, she huddled in her leather jacket a little more and increased her pace again.

One male jogged and caught up with her. He grabbed her arm and yanked her back a bit. “See, it’s not safe.”

Thalasia dug her heel in and adjusted her stance. The guy had moved her once. It wouldn’t happen again. Especially as the other two trailed behind him, taking up space on either side of her. The three of them boxed her in. All right. If they wanted a fight, she’d give them one. She balled up her fists and narrowed her eyes at the males. “I’m fully capable of protecting myself,” she spat. “So you have one last chance to walk away.”

One of them snickered. “Three against one, little girl,” he said as he closed the distance between them. “But maybe if you give us some of that gold, then we’ll let you go.”

She’d itched for a good fight all day. And this guy just gave her the perfect reason to start one. He had at least half a foot on her, but in her world, that didn’t mean shit. She stomped on his foot and threw a right hook, sending him stumbling backward. The other two lunged at her simultaneously. Thalasia ducked a punch, elbowed one in the gut, and struck the other in the chest. Although it knocked them both back, the fight wasn’t over yet.

The first male she’d hit kicked the back of her thigh, driving her down to one knee. The sting shot down her leg. As her eyes widened, showing the whites, her hands clenched. This fucker had a lot of nerve attacking her. Dropping low, she dodged the sidekick that came at her and drew the blade she kept tucked underneath her belt. With a guttural roar, she drove it hard into his thigh and ripped it free. He shrieked as blood splattered all over her face.

“Please,” the Seelie girl pleaded as she tripped over a partially shredded limb, crimson staining the ground beneath it. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

A twinge shot up the back of Thalasia’s skull. “No,” she groaned. Trying to shake off the vision, she struggled to her feet and staggered

backward. The blade fell from her hand and skittered across the pavement.

Red grime matted the girl's brown hair beneath a golden crown. The Seelie pressed her back against a hut, slid down to the dirt floor, and drew her knees to her chest. She lifted her hazel eyes. "Please," she begged. "Let me go."

"Bitch!" a male hollered as his fist connected with Thalasia's face.

A slight crunch rang out in her ears as blood gushed from her nose. It only intensified the throbbing in her head, almost like a battering ram repeatedly slamming against her brain.

"No!" the Seelie girl screamed.

Someone's foot hit her square in the chest and sent her flying backward. Thalasia slammed into a brick wall. With an agonizing grunt, she dropped to her knees.

A bloody hand reached toward the young Seelie. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes as she shrieked.

Thalasia pressed the heel of her palm against one eye. Not that it staved off the pain radiating across her mind. Even the completion of her vision didn't help.

One attacker shoved her back and reached for her purse. As her gaze lifted to the dark-haired male, her wings sprang forth. The male's brown eyes widened, his tan face turned pallid and his forehead beaded with sweat. "What the fuck?" he screeched.

Shit. She must've lost control of her glamour. Given the ache that had set up shop in her head, she didn't have the capacity to manipulate their minds. Which only left her with one option. Thalasia grabbed the guy's arm and sent a jolt of lightning through his body. As he landed on the ground, writhing in pain, she scrambled to her feet. She quickly located her dagger, picked it up, tucked it away, and ran.

It wouldn't take but a moment to reclaim her glamour, but she could do that and get away at the same time. She'd deal with her injuries later. Getting away was more important than anything else right now, though it seemed she couldn't escape her visions. At least if the agony rooted deep in her mind was anything to go by. This was worse than the one she had earlier.

The gods weren't giving her a choice this time. Not only did she have to leave the human world, she had to go where they wanted. Or face the consequences.

THALASIA DRANK in the large temple standing before her. Stone lanterns lined the staircase leading to the entryway. The shrine stood three stories tall, each part with a red roof inlaid with intricate gold designs. The gold continued underneath each level of the pavilion.

It shone brilliantly beneath the sunlight, casting exquisitely on the plunge pool behind it. Especially as the waterfall cascaded down, spraying into the pool at the bottom. The roar of the water brought a smile to her face. Although the shrine was to some dragon, she could stand there all day basking in its glory. It didn't matter that she'd come through it once already, it would always take her breath away.

Gods, she'd miss this, but she had a job to do. Thalasia smirked. Something she never thought she'd think about again, but she didn't have a choice. Letting out a heavy sigh, she ascended the staircase and entered the temple. As she crossed the threshold, she surveyed her surroundings. Thankfully, the place appeared empty. It was too early in the day for purveyors and worshippers, though she'd still have to watch out for those who maintained the grounds.

Her gaze flicked to the two dragon statues sitting on either side of a set of bamboo doors that led to the main hall. From what little she'd gathered, it was one area open to the public. Silence greeted her, which meant it was completely empty. Thalasia strode forward, quietly slipped through the doors, and stepped around the corner to the hidden second-level entrance. The jump-point itself was in the temple's third story.

This was where things got fun. Hopefully, she wouldn't run into any priests or priestesses this time around. At least she'd gotten them to forget all about her arrival. Getting them to forget about her departure might be harder unless she knocked them out. Thalasia shrugged. It was certainly an option.

Gently, she shut the door behind her and took the spiraling staircase two steps at a time. The quicker she got there, the faster she could get out of here. She would've come last night, except she needed to do some digging about the realm she had to go to. Though she hadn't found much of anything regarding Trozenia. It wasn't somewhere her predecessors had traveled. All she had to go on was the short list of known species: humans, elves, and minotaurs.

Thalasia hit the landing of the second floor and paused briefly. She heightened her senses, listening carefully for voices on the other side. Still nothing. She continued her ascent to the top floor. As she approached the top of the staircase, she used her glamour and altered her ears, the outer tip elongating into a point. She'd already hidden her wings, and dressed in a natural leather halter, skirt, and boots, so there wasn't anything else to change.

Or so she hoped.

Stopping at the third-floor landing, Thalasia stilled and shut her eyes. Droplets of water hit the rocks and leaves surrounding the sanctuary. All the sounds she heard came from outside the temple, but nothing from the prayer room itself. Good. Slowly, she turned the knob and slipped into the heart of the shrine.

A golden statue of an enormous dragon with sapphire blue eyes sat in the middle of the room. Depictions of a great battle covered the walls, but she didn't understand any part of the story beyond that. Quietly, Thalasia closed the door and crossed the room. Standing in front of the statue, she stared at it. The piece was twice her height and size. "No way this is accurate," she mumbled.

Dragons were much larger than this bust portrayed.

Shaking the thought from her head, Thalasia focused on the symbols she needed to draw. Adjusting the gold chain around her neck, she removed the lyre charm from beneath her halter and stroked her forefinger across its strings. A silver glow coated her hand.

The air rippled as she lifted her fingers and carefully painted each mark in the air. One wrong line or misplaced symbol, and she'd end up somewhere other than where she intended. Thalasia got the last piece set. Just as the jump-point opened, the side door cracked open, and a priest entered the room. "Shit," she muttered.

He screamed something at her in a foreign language, though she imagined it was along the lines of, *"Who are you? What are you doing here? You don't belong here!"*

Either way, she couldn't have him blabbing to his friends that he'd seen her. Thalasia eyed the jump-point out of her periphery as it pulsated. "Sorry about this," she stated to the bald male. She opened her mouth and let out a low aria. He went silent and stood completely motionless. Lifting her voice higher, she manipulated his memories and wiped the last sixty

seconds from his synapses. Without releasing the note, Thalasia slowly backed up and stepped through the jump-point.

The dragon statue behind her disappeared from her sight. Bright hues of blue and purple swirled around her as the portal engulfed her. A multitude of colors raced past her as she walked forward. It was like a rainbow swallowed her and spit her out into a new world. She exited the jump-point, stepping onto a dirt road surrounded by an endless sea of lush green trees. A group of humans brandishing swords encircled her. *Crap.* She'd stepped out of a small fire and waltzed right into a burning blaze.

There were too many for her to use her siren song like she'd done with the priest mere moments ago. Maybe they wouldn't—one of them swung their blade at her. Thalasia jumped back, barely dodging the hit. "Guess that answers that question." She drew her dagger from her skirt's hidden pocket. While she'd do whatever it took to protect herself, it was wise to keep the extent of her powers hidden.

She evaded most of their strikes. The blade's sharp edge sliced her arm, which was better than the alternative. They'd come awfully close to hitting her in the belly. Going on the offensive, Thalasia faked a parried step to the left and threw her dagger. She hit the man in the neck. Blood gushed out from his throat as he grabbed at it and fell to his knees. Before any of the others could come at her, she spun on the back of her heel and threw a bolt of lightning at the next closest person.

A loud *thunk* rang out. Her gaze snapped toward one of the four remaining humans. Well, three…an arrow whizzed by her face as another *thunk* resounded not a foot in front of her. Thalasia's head swiveled toward the noise just as the male dropped his sword. It skittered across the dirt floor. If he'd gotten any closer…her eyes widened as she swallowed to wet her parched throat. She didn't know who, but someone had just saved her life.

Not that she could think about that right this second. Two humans remained. Thalasia focused on them. A brown-skinned elf landed on the ground with ease. Before the humans could react, the female thrust her spear into the belly of one and then the other. They both flopped limply to the ground, crimson pooling beneath each of their bodies and staining the land red.

An elf with long, caramel-colored hair touched down beside the other female. They glanced at one another. "You are who?" the brown-skinned

one asked in Elvish.

No elf she'd ever crossed paths with in the past had organized their words like that. Although she understood what the female said, the dialect was strange. It wasn't something she could match, but she would do what she could. "My name is Thalasia," she replied in Elvish as she crossed over to the human she'd killed and yanked out her dagger.

"You came from where?"

Oh, how to answer that? Atlis rules forbade her from disclosing the truth of her…inheritance and purpose. But it might make things go faster if she could offer them something. Maybe a half-truth. Or the truth without details. She wiped the blood from her blade on the human's clothes and sheathed it back in its hiding spot. "I'm a world traveler." Thalasia flicked her gaze from one female to the other. "Who are you?"

The brown-skinned female's mouth pinched as she lowered her chin, looking down on Thalasia. "The ones who saved your life."

"I am called Camylla," the other female answered. "And she is called Rylln."

"Cam!" Rylln growled. "You should not tell her that. We owe her nothing."

"She has answered our questions without resistance. It is of little consequence to give her our names. Just polite," Camylla stated. Brushing her caramel-colored hair over her shoulder, she focused her green eyes on Thalasia. "You are alone?"

"Yes." That much was obvious. It wasn't as if anyone else was around. With that question, the conversation could only go in one direction. She had to head it off before it got too far. "I'm an orphan."

Camylla retrieved her arrows from the two dead bodies and placed them in the quiver slung across her back. "We need to handle this."

"Agreed," Rylln grunted. Her brown eyes narrowed at Thalasia. "What do we do with her?"

"Take her with us."

"No! Absolutely not."

"You heard her, Ry. She has no one. With what she did, she could be of use," Camylla claimed. "A decision that only Arel can make."

"Fine." Grumbling under her breath, Rylln flicked her wrist and all six bodies levitated. She muttered something and the dead humans floated through the air, deeper into the forest.

Thalasia cocked an eyebrow and tilted her head. She watched as the corpses disappeared. Her ears prickled as the bodies dropped somewhere in the forest. A fire sprang to life. “What are you doing with them?”

“Destroying them. If they are discovered, it will start a war,” Camylla replied. “Humans dislike us.” She inhaled a deep breath and blew it out. Sand swirled in the air, covering the mess created on the dirt floor.

“No one likes us,” Rylln tacked on.

Great, Thalasia thought to herself. Of all the species she could’ve disguised herself as she had to choose a hated one. Well, that certainly wasn’t going to make things easier. Not that she could change it now. Though it certainly explained her vision. And why the humans attacked her without provocation. “If that’s true, then it sounds to me like you’re already at war.”

“Smart girl.” Camylla cracked a slight grin at her. “Now come. We must go.”

Right. To see this Arel person, whoever that was… Gods, she wished she’d never come here. Thalasia peered at the jump-point. It would take too long to initiate it, even if she had an idea of where to go. Which meant she’d have to kill the two females that just saved her life. That made less sense than seeing where the path led her. If she only lived a few more days, at least she’d get to see her family again. Shaking off the thought, she started forward and trailed behind Camylla and Rylln.

The past had to stay buried. Otherwise, she’d never do what she came to do. Survive.

CHAPTER 3

Thalasia surveyed her surroundings as they trekked through the tallest trees she'd ever seen before. It was almost as if the fae village brushed the sky. She clung to the rope banister as they crossed a wooden bridge, leading them from one tree to the next. The bridge groaned slightly as it swayed beneath her feet. She peered over the side, hesitating for a moment. It was a long fall to the bottom. Although she had wings, she couldn't reveal the truth of her existence to these people. It was the number one rule Demeter gave the first Atlis upon their creation. At least according to the way her mother told it.

"Your powers come from many gods and goddesses, Thalasia."

"What do you mean, Mama?" she asked. That didn't make any sense. Why did that matter in keeping their existence a secret?

"Well, I told you how Demeter created us, right?"

"Yes. After she lost her daughter, she gave Persephone's nymph friend's wings so they could find her, but they couldn't. Then she found out from someone else who stole her, so she made the Atlis because she didn't want any mother to suffer like her." It wasn't word-for-word, but it was the story her mama had told her many times before.

"Right. And she got a lot of gifts from the other gods and goddesses. Like Aphrodite, who granted us with beauty; Athena, who gifted us with wisdom; Ares, who gave us skill in combat; Apollo, who granted us with the power of sight; Hermes, who granted us with song; Poseidon, who gifted us with power over the sea; and Zeus, who gave us control of lightning and air. These are all secrets we must protect. People can believe

that we're a myth only, otherwise, we'll never be able to complete our missions properly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

Yeah. The mission always took priority over anything else, including their lives. Thalasia shook the memory off, burying it down deep. She couldn't think about her mother right now. Not even an auspicious moment like that one. It only ever ended one way—in tears.

No one here needed to see her scars, emotional or physical. She rolled her shoulders, releasing the tension that had crept into her body as they crossed another bridge. Thalasia narrowed her eyes at the group of elves dressed in leather armor gathered in front of a silver-haired male. She flicked her gaze to Camylla as the female slowed her pace. Camylla exchanged a glance with Rylln, who trailed behind Thalasia. "Is this normal?" Thalasia asked.

"No," Camylla replied.

"Now, go!" the silver-haired male proclaimed. "Do not return until you find her!"

Could this be the village that the elf child she'd seen in her vision had disappeared from? If so, the collection of warriors made sense. Thalasia eyed the male out of her periphery. A single braid hung in front of one pointed ear as his ice-blue eyes focused on the crowd's dispersal. Several tattoos covered his chest and neck, but she couldn't quite make out the design. The dark blue duster he wore hid much of it. He shoved a hand through his hair, gripping it in his fist.

Was this Arel? Camylla continued forward, leading their small group toward him. And could it be his daughter that had gone missing? He acted like a concerned father. Maybe even an angry one. She needed confirmation before she offered aid, provided they would accept it.

"Arel," Camylla called out. "Tell me what has happened."

"They have taken Alyndra," he stated as he paced back and forth. "I do not…" his words trailed off. He halted in his steps, his eyes zeroing in on Thalasia. "Who is this? What is she doing here?"

"This is Thalasia," Rylln responded. "Cam thought her an orphan that we needed to bring with us."

Camylla narrowed her eyes at the female. "That is not the only reason," she snapped.

Arel stepped closer to Camylla. "Then why is *she* here?"

The female glimpsed at Thalasia. Camylla closed the distance between her and Arel. “I believe she is a walker.”

What the hell was a walker? And why had the female spoken to Arel in a hushed tone? Did Camylla think she couldn’t hear her? Elves had excellent hearing and sight. Although she wasn’t actually an elf, both still applied. One of the many gifts given to the Atlis. Thalasia kept from rolling her eyes and focused instead on the exchange between Arel and Camylla.

“That is not possible. They do not exist.”

“Arel, I swear to you…she *is* a walker. And a powerful one. She appeared out of nowhere and dispatched two humans with magic not seen before.”

Damn. The entire trek here and she hadn’t once considered that they’d arrived on that scene prior to her. Or that they’d witnessed her blip out of thin air. She’d never known an elf to have any kind of comprehension of how it was possible. Though it sounded like they had their own myths about it. Something that would’ve been great to know beforehand.

“Rylln, you are rather quiet. Do you not agree?” Arel asked.

“I think we have more questions than answers regarding the child.”

Arel strode over to where Thalasia stood. As he clasped his hands at the small of his back, he scrutinized her slight form. “Are you a walker?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“It is a simple question.”

“To you maybe, but to me it isn’t.” Thalasia interlaced her fingers. It was the only way to keep from folding her arms. While she didn’t want to offend him, she also didn’t want to appear defensive. “I don’t know what a walker is, so I can’t answer your question.”

“Someone who can walk between worlds,” Camylla replied.

Arel’s eyebrows furrowed as he jerked his head in the female’s direction. “It is not your job to share knowledge. Especially something she should have known as an elf.”

No elves that she’d ever crossed paths with had used the term before. And it certainly didn’t mean the same thing to her people, not that she could admit as much. “Yes, I’m a walker.”

“Yet you are an orphan?” he questioned. Arel’s face tightened and his lips pressed together into a thin line. He shook his head. “One is not possible if the other is true.”

Thalasia dug her nails into her palm. It was bad enough that he called her a liar, but for him to think she'd lie about her parents… She clenched her jaw and drew in a slow, steady breath. "Believe it or not, that's your choice. It doesn't mean it isn't true." She met his gaze. "I'm here to offer my help. To get Alyndra back, who I'm presuming is your daughter."

His mouth downturned as his chin dropped. Arel scoffed and peered down his nose at her. "Whether it is true is irrelevant. You are a child. It would be unwise to risk the lives of my people and entrust a child, especially one I do not know." He glanced at Rylln. "Take her somewhere safe." Waving a hand dismissively, he spun on the back of his heel.

Heat flushed her body. She ground her teeth. Her jaw ached, but she refused to give into her desire to just beat the shit out of this arrogant male. Thalasia rolled her shoulders and folded her arms across her chest. It wouldn't do her a damn bit of good to fail at her mission. While she could certainly handle things on her own, she still had to confirm *who* she had to save. "Alyndra…she has brown hair, hazel eyes, and wears a golden crown with butterfly wings."

Arel narrowed his eyes at her. His nose wrinkled as if a foul scent had blown through. "It is impossible for you to know that. Unless…" His words trailed off as his entire body stiffened. "She is a traitor! Arrest her!"

"What are you—" A pair of silver cuffs snapped onto her wrists, cutting her question off. Thalasia glared at Rylln, who stood there with a smirk on her face. Well, shit. This wasn't what she had in mind for affirming her suspicions. *Good move,* she thought to herself. Now, what did she do?

"Take her away!" Arel ordered.

"As you wish," Rylln replied. She yanked on the chains, tugging Thalasia along. "Move."

The last thing she heard as Rylln dragged her off to only the gods knew where was an argument between Camylla and Arel. Unfortunately, their words came out so fast that she didn't quite catch everything. But one thing stuck out—minotaurs. Thalasia bit back a groan. Didn't this mission just get better and better? Just one more problem to add to the ever-growing list. She couldn't say what was worse: this or dealing with the humans.

THALASIA SLAMMED her fist into the stone wall, but it didn't crack or even dent. "Shit." No matter how many ways she attempted to get out of this cell, she couldn't break any damn part of it. Not the metal bars or the lock. If she had her dagger, she could've used that to pick the lock, but that woman had stolen it.

This was what she got for listening to the damn gods! A whole shitload of problems. If she couldn't get out of this cell, then whatever the minotaurs did to that girl was on her hands. With a loud groan, she kicked the silver bars. They didn't even budge. Thalasia shoved a hand into her blue hair and gripped it hard. How the fuck was she supposed to get out of here?

She glimpsed the floating map out of her periphery. It had nearly finished collecting details about this realm—forests, mountains, towns, and so on. Thalasia eyed the barrier trapping her in this jail and gazed at the bands wrapped tightly around her wrists. She had no issue with her glamour, or accessing any of the magical items in the purse she'd hidden under her skirt. Though her earlier attempt at her siren song on the guards failed. The prison didn't prevent magic, only the cuffs impacted it. Thalasia chewed on the inside of her cheek. That didn't mean she couldn't escape.

She strode to where the map hung in the air and scanned the various territories. Just as she suspected, she'd found herself among wood elves. Another area belonged to silver elves, somewhere to the west. Humans lived to the east, minotaurs took up the south, and centaurs ran along the north. Certainly an interesting combination. As she watched the last few lines fill in on the map, she dug into her purple pouch. Her ancestors had collected a multitude of items over the centuries, and she was fairly positive the bag contained something that would help.

Searching through the various pockets, she monitored the map as it finished. There were so many damn things in here, but she was looking for one particular item. Where the fuck was it? Maybe down by the journals. Thalasia dug deeper into her purse. As much as she loved the extension charm, sometimes she despised—"Aha!" As she pulled a skeleton key out, she beamed. Oh, yes. This would do just perfectly.

Maybe. One way to find out. With the map completed, she rolled it up and tucked it away. No need to have it out yet. Thalasia crossed the cell, peered both ways down the hall, and hooked an arm around one bar.

Remaining vigilant, she struggled to get the key into the right hole. It took longer than expected, but she succeeded. Slowly, she turned it toward the right and the door creaked ever so slightly.

Retrieving the key from the keyhole, Thalasia nudged the cell door open a little farther and slipped into the hallway. She pressed her back against the wall, closely monitoring both sides. While she'd tracked how they'd taken her to the prison, it wasn't the best way out. And she couldn't consult the map without taking a chance they'd catch her. Shit. Which direction did she go? "Pick one and pray," she muttered.

No. That wouldn't work. Thalasia peered one way down the corridor and then the other. Torches flickered, causing shadows to dance across the stone walls. When Rylln had dragged her down here, they'd descended beneath the trees. While their homes were closer to the sky, their prisons were under the earth. A slow grin crossed her face. It should be easy to find her way out. All she had to do was follow the thick scent of dank water. She sniffed the air. Left should lead her out. Or closer to the top.

Thalasia strode forward but kept her senses alert for even the slightest sound. The only way she'd successfully get out of here was if she didn't run into anyone. Glancing over her shoulder, she rounded the corner and slammed right into someone. *Shit*. Her gaze narrowed on the female standing in front of her.

Staring at her, Camylla smirked. "Follow me."

Okay. That wasn't what she expected. Maybe it wasn't the wisest choice to trust the female, but the woman had defended her several times. Besides, she didn't have any other choice. Thalasia dipped her chin and prayed to Demeter this wasn't the biggest mistake of her life.

"ARE you going to tell me what's going on or am I just supposed to guess?" Thalasia questioned. Camylla had gotten her out of the labyrinth that was the Elven prison and away from their territory. Thankfully, they hadn't run into anyone else on their way out.

Camylla peered over her shoulder. She removed a dagger from her left side, flipped it in the air, caught it, and held it out to Thalasia by the hilt. "You may want this where we are going."

She canted her head at the female. That didn’t exactly answer her question. At least she got her dagger back—the last gift she’d ever received from her father. Wrapping her fingers around the handle, the Atlis crest pressed warmly against her palm. Had Camylla noticed the wings that tightly gripped a sword with an intricately designed poppy flower in the hilt? Even if the female had, it wasn’t a widely recognized emblem. Only another Atlis would know it. Or a sentry, but she hadn’t seen one of them in years. And she was the only living Atlis. Thalasia sheathed the dagger in the back of her skirt. “Where are we going?”

“To rescue the princess.”

“You mean we’re going to where the minotaurs are,” Thalasia corrected. Though both likely applied. If they found one, then they’d probably find the other. The female raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing. She cocked one corner of her mouth and shrugged. “I didn’t understand a lot of yours and Arel’s argument, except that.”

“I told him he was making a mistake by arresting you. That you were not in cahoots with the minotaurs and there was another reason you knew what Alyndra looked like. Despite all the reasons I provided, he refused to accept you as a walker.”

“Yet you went against him and freed me anyway. Why?” An answer she desperately needed. She didn’t trust easily. And she had to know whether she could trust Camylla. More than she already had.

The female let out an exasperated sigh and ran a hand down her peasant blouse. “Every year, at the time of the harvest, the minotaurs make a blood sacrifice to their god, Minos. This has gone on for centuries. In the beginning, they used to steal and enslave human children. Then they moved on to Elven children. Regardless of our efforts, we have never successfully made it through their labyrinth and stopped this from happening. I believe you might be our only hope of changing that.”

Well, hell. That explained so much of her vision. The girl had to be backing away from a minotaur. Wait. No. That couldn’t be right. She’d seen minotaur limbs scattered across the ground. Thalasia canted her head at Camylla. “That sounds like a colossal risk and a lot of faith to put in someone you don’t know, let alone a child.”

Camylla halted in her steps. “Perhaps, but I saw how you appeared out of nowhere and what you did to that human. The stench of his charred skin

is burned into my memory. You are no ordinary child, regardless of what you declare."

"Point taken. Although some of that might be difficult as long as I still have these on." Thalasia lifted her arms and gestured to the silver bracelets.

The female narrowed her green eyes at Thalasia. "If I remove them, how can I trust you will not run off and leave me to handle the situation alone?"

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. As much as she had to trust Camylla, Camylla had to trust her. "Because you're right. I'm not an ordinary child. I'm so much more than that. Besides, we have the same goal."

"Yes, I suppose we do." Camylla removed a small, straight silver bar from beneath her bracer. She touched it to the underside of each cuff and they fell from Thalasia's arms.

Rubbing her wrists, Thalasia scrutinized Camylla's outfit. The female was better dressed for war than she was. Thalasia dug her purse out from under her skirt. "Before we go any farther, I need to get suited up." She didn't have much in the way of armor, but some protection was better than none.

Especially with what they were about to face.

CHAPTER 4

Thalasia stared at the full moon as it rose over the horizon, coloring the sky in various hues of blue and purple. Despite the night's beauty hovering above them, it was anything but where she and Camylla hid. Hooves thundered against the ground. She pressed up against a stone wall, blending into the darkness that bled down on them. Several minotaurs passed by their location. Even with the map's help, it had taken them far too long to find their way through the labyrinth. They had no time to waste. Otherwise, this would all be for nothing.

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of a minotaur. The first she'd ever seen. It was huge, standing nearly twelve feet tall. That didn't account for all the muscle. Its biceps bulged and its legs were almost as wide as her whole body. With its large hooves, it could easily crush her beneath its foot. Or spear her with the horns atop its head. And that was just one! Did they all look like that? Another one stopped beside the other minotaur. There wasn't much difference between them, except maybe a few inches in height.

Shit! How the fuck am I supposed to defeat these damn things? Even with her powers, it would be impossible. The gods had sent her on a mission that was doomed to fail. Was this punishment for the last year? For all the visions she'd ignored?

No. That couldn't be it. Demeter wouldn't risk a child's life like that. No self-respecting god or goddess would. Well…not all of them. There was Nyx, but even that seemed like too much. Maybe she was just overthinking all of this. They didn't have the hide of a dragon. Killing

these creatures wasn't impossible. Thalasia peered over her shoulder at her companion.

What had the female said about why they couldn't defeat the minotaurs? Right! The elves had never made it through the labyrinth. They had, which already got them closer to rescuing Alyndra, so their success was inevitable. She zeroed in on the two minotaurs, chit-chatting amongst themselves. "You take the smaller one. The bigger one is mine," Thalasia muttered. She crouched down on her haunches and slowly unsheathed her sword and dagger.

Camylla grabbed her arm. "No. We need to be stealthy and find the princess. We cannot win in a fight against them."

Thalasia froze, her feet rooting her to the ground at the cave's mouth. A shiver shot down her spine. Mistress was coming for her. No, she couldn't let that happen again. Tightening her shoulders, she lifted her chin and clenched her fists.

"You need to go," Klaus stated. "Before they get any closer."

"No. I can fight. I'm not leaving." She'd done that one too many times in her life. Running away never solved problems. It just left them there to fester.

He kneeled down and grabbed her arms. "You can't win in a fight against her. And I won't give that woman another chance to kidnap you. Do you understand me? You run."

"But I'm strong now! I'm trained to fight."

"No!" he barked. "Run, Thalasia! That's what you do."

One memory bled into another. *"I need you to fly, Thalasia." Her mother took her hands within her own and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Do you hear me?"*

"Why? Is something coming? If so, I can fight. You taught me to fight." That was her role, right? Part of her purpose? To fight the evil. No matter what form it came in.

"You can't fight them. Not this time, sweetheart." Her mother rose to her feet. "One day, perhaps, but right now, you need to fly."

"But, Mom, I don't want to leave you." Why wouldn't they let her fight? Whatever it was coming for them, they could defeat it together.

"I know." A soft, sad smile crossed her mother's face. "I need you to fly, Thalasia. As fast as you can to the nearest jump-point. You must leave and never look back."

They all wanted her to run. She always ran. Like a coward, she let someone else fight her battles, and it always ended horribly. Thalasia shrugged off Camylla's grip and glared at the female. "No. The last time I didn't fight, everyone died! Never again!" She dropped her glamour, freeing her wings from their confines. Shaking them out, she rose to her full height of five feet, charged toward the minotaurs, and leaped into the air. As she landed on the back of the larger creature, she drove the tip of her sword into its neck and summoned the strongest bolt of lightning she could conjure, striking the other one down.

Thalasia hopped down as both creatures dropped to the ground with a loud thud. Her feet hit the dirt floor with grace. Glancing over her shoulder, she took stock of the crowd of minotaurs that had gathered. A sneer crossed her face as she clenched the hilts of her blades in each hand. Letting out a guttural roar, she raced toward the hoard.

Things were about to get messy.

THALASIA'S CHEST heaved with each ragged breath she took. As the head she'd just lopped off stopped, she scanned the terrain and assessed the damage. Ash rained down atop the limbs strewn everywhere and the remnants of the minotaur bodies stacked upon one another. A river of blood covered the earth. She didn't know how many minotaur lives she'd ripped apart. Fifty. A hundred. Or even how much Camylla had contributed. Not that it mattered. It was done. The battle was over and they'd won.

As her breathing settled, she strode forward and stepped over one body part or another. There wasn't a point in tracking it. She just had to find Alyndra amidst this mess. Thalasia glimpsed movement out of her periphery. She halted and spun around on the back of her heel, holding her sword at the ready.

"There is no need for that," Camylla stated. With the back of her hand, the female wiped a crimson stain from her cheek. "The entire village is dead."

Lowering her blade, Thalasia dipped her chin. "Good." Just as she expected. "Have you found Alyndra?"

“No. Not yet.”

“Then let’s split up. I’ll go this way; you go that way.” They’d find the little girl faster. Once Camylla nodded her agreement, the two of them parted ways. Based on her vision, she’d locate the princess somewhere near a stone hut. There were several of them, and she’d killed countless minotaurs all over the place. It could take longer than necessary to scour through it all. Unless… Thalasia stopped in her tracks. She closed her eyes and heightened her other senses, listening for a sound that didn’t belong and sniffing for something other than the copper scent that lingered in the air.

The sound of another’s breaths bursting in and out and a racing heartbeat rang in her ears. Thalasia opened her eyes and followed the noise’s origin. She circumvented a pile of bodies, climbed over some debris, and located the young princess near a couple of minotaur carcasses. “Alyndra?”

The elf girl’s hazel eyes lifted to Thalasia. “Please,” the girl pleaded as she backed up, tripping over a partially shredded limb, crimson staining the ground beneath it. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

What? Why would the female assume she was there to harm her? Maybe the little girl was confused. Or maybe this wasn’t Alyndra? Thalasia took a step closer. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

The little girl’s eyes widened, and she blanched. Moving backward, the young elf pressed her back against a hut, slid down to the dirt floor, and drew her knees to her chest. “Please,” she begged. “Let me go.”

Why did it seem like this girl didn’t believe her? Unless this really wasn’t Alyndra. Had she gotten things wrong? Thalasia chewed on the inside of her cheek and scrutinized the young elf. Big hazel eyes. Red grime matted the girl’s brown hair beneath a golden crown with butterflies at the edges. No. Everything she saw before her was in her vision. This had to be Alyndra. “I promise. I’m not going to hurt you.” Her grip tightened on the hilts she held. Thalasia dropped her gaze to the two blades in her hands. That probably didn’t help her cause. “I’m putting these up. Okay?” She returned her sword and dagger to their sheaths. “See?”

Alyndra shook her head. “Please,” she mumbled. “I just want to go home.” Tears rolled down the female’s face.

“That’s what I’ll do. I’ll take you home…back to your father.” Thalasia held out a hand to the girl. “Come with me and you’ll go home.”

“No!” the elf child shrieked.

“Alyndra!” Camylla yelled as she raced past Thalasia. The woman skidded to a halt, crouched down on her haunches, and tightly embraced the elf child.

Thalasia stared at them both. It didn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t Alyndra take her hand? A drop of blood fell from her fingers and hit a small puddle. Lowering her arm, Thalasia glimpsed her reflection in the water.

Crimson streaked across her forehead, nose, and cheeks. It had also gotten caked in her wings, darkening their natural shade of blue. None of which included the blood that covered the rest of her body. Thalasia drank in the surrounding scene. Images of wings staked to the ground flashed in her mind. Memories of people tied up, pleading for their lives.

Wherever she went, death followed her. How many lives had she ripped apart? How many had sacrificed themselves so she could survive? All so she could become…*this*. She fell to her knees as tears pricked the corners of her eyes. All this time, she believed her vision showed Alyndra cowering from a monster. Just not the one she thought. “I’m the monster.”

A droplet of rain hit her head. She lifted her gaze toward the sky as it opened up. It was almost as if the gods cried with her. As if they’d suffered alongside her this whole time. Shared in all the rage she’d carried over the loss of every person she’d ever loved. The rain trickled down her face, arms, and body, washing away the blood as if the brutality she’d unleashed never happened.

“You are no monster, Thalasia,” Camylla declared. “The princess is safe because of you. As are many children. We will no longer fear what the harvest may bring.”

Thalasia lowered her head, dropping her eyes to the ground. “That doesn’t mean they all deserved what I delivered.” Were there minotaurs she could’ve spared? Young that could’ve had a different future? It wasn’t her place to be judge and executioner, yet that’s what she’d done. One blow after another without pause over their differences; she’d killed an entire species. Why?

“Perhaps, but you did what was necessary. Sometimes that is not an easy action to take,” Camylla said. “You carry a great weight. I may not know much about you, but I can see that. Do not feel you must understand everything all at once. Answers come when they are least expected.”

“Thank you.” A small hand caressed her cheek. “Pretty friend.”

No one had ever called her a friend. It seemed like such a slight gesture. This young elf girl who cowered from her mere moments ago hadn’t just touched her, but called her a friend. As she regarded the Elven child, the corners of her mouth upturned.

“Yes, a friend.” Thalasia brushed the combined tears and rain from her face as she stood. She shifted her attention to Camylla. “Take her home. I’ll handle…all this.” She gestured to the mess.

“Thank you.” Camylla took Alyndra’s hand within her own. The two strode off and disappeared from Thalasia’s sight.

The rain eased to a slight drizzle as Thalasia faced the carnage. It was a gruesome scene, but it wasn’t something she ever wished to forget. Her anger had led her down this path, and it wasn’t a place she could return. She’d set fire to it all and let her grievances burn with it. A strong enough blaze could consume the pain she’d tried so hard to forget.

Maybe that’s what all of this had been about. Not just a reminder of her purpose, but that there was no way to let go of the past without facing it. Something she’d never done.

This was her second chance. An opportunity to do right by those who’d given their lives so she could continue forward. She couldn’t do that if she ignored her visions. They were a part of her just as much as her parents and Klaus. It was time she did right by them and all of those she hadn’t saved. That’s what she’d do. One day at a time, until her last breath, she’d fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. Because everyone needed a friend.

THE SERPENTINE SISTERHOOD

ERIN CASEY

Medusa trailed her finger through her jewelry box, looking for the perfect venom-filled earrings for the evening's auction-turned-funeral. Snakes slithered down her cheeks and arms, picking through the intricate golden pieces. "No, no, no," Medusa said, waving off the jewelry one by one. Asmodeus, her most beloved snake, hissed in annoyance and spat an earring out before coiling around one in the shape of a serpent with an emerald eye. It held an opalescent crystal, the hollow inside meant to hold her precious venom.

"There we are," Medusa purred and took the earrings before nuzzling Asmodeus with her nose. "Good choice, my love. This will work well tonight." She put them on and walked over to her mirror to inspect if they matched her attire.

A silk emerald dress with spaghetti straps and a slit nearly up to her hip hugged her curvy body. She'd chosen bracelets with green accents and a serpent necklace with an eye that matched her earrings. Medusa smoothed down her dress and smiled at the way her gold laced-up sandals stood out against the green. Yes, this felt like proper attire for the night.

"Well, don't you look delicious," a sultry voice called from the doorway.

Medusa looked over her shoulder at her lover. Daphne leaned against the frame, dressed in a dark brown v-neck pantsuit with sheer sleeves, and a chiffon train that ended at the back of her ankles. Her waist and wrists were embroidered in laurel branches that complimented Medusa's shoes and jewelry. Daphne had braided her deep brunette hair behind her head, a few leaves woven in. The nymph was even more beautiful today than she had been when Medusa had freed her from that blasted tree centuries ago.

"You're one to talk," Medusa said with a grin. She crossed the floor and pulled Daphne into a long, deep kiss. "Hmm, you're going to be a distraction tonight."

"And you're not?" Daphne teased. She ran a finger along Medusa's exposed leg. "We're on a rescue mission, not showing up for fashion week. Or tempting me to bed."

Medusa snorted. "No one said we couldn't enjoy ourselves at the same time." Asmodeus slithered forward and planted a sweet kiss on Daphne's forehead, earning him a smile and a scritch on the neck. "Is Io almost ready?"

Daphne rolled her eyes. “You know how she is. She’s spending too much time with those birds of hers instead of getting dressed.”

Medusa bumped her hip against Daphne. “Be nice. You know dressing up is not really her thing. I’ll check on her. You make sure you have our itinerary and tickets ready for us when we leave.” She brushed her hand along Daphne’s arm and left the bedroom.

Medusa walked through the hall, which opened into a vast living space with a full kitchen, living room, and dining room. The architecture was Greek inspired, drawing from each of their individual histories.

Daphne, an archaeologist, had salvaged some of the paintings and vases that now decorated their home. An ancient bow and two arrows hung over the fireplace, a tribute to Daphne’s younger days when she used to hunt and travel in the woods, trying to avoid the men fighting for her hand. A painting of Goddess Artemis showing Daphne how to wield a bow was a nice addition.

Beside it, a wreath of violets hung around a piece of pottery shaped like a moon with a heifer etched into it. Goddess Hera fed the cow, or rather Io, from her hands. Medusa and Daphne had thought Io wouldn’t want to remember her days trapped in the body of a cow, but with how fond she was of animals, and her newfound abilities to shapeshift, she rather adored the piece. Io also reminded them that while Zeus had changed her into said cow, Hera was the one who’d helped protect her from him as much as she could, so the display honored Hera, too.

A silver platter with Medusa’s own gorgon likeness hung with the other works of art. Most pottery depicted her as a hideous monster, but this particular artisan had seen a softer side to her. They’d decided to show her whole body with her snakes coiled gracefully around her face. She stood with her hands clasped while Goddess Athena floated behind her, arms outstretched and granting the gift, or curse–it depended on which story one read–to Medusa.

Medusa, Daphne, and Io had all been favored by the goddesses at some point in their lives. Both Medusa and Io had even been Priestesses to the very patrons who’d blessed them in what some might call a twisted way. Despite the fact Poseidon had taken advantage of Medusa in Athena’s hallowed halls, Athena couldn’t *punish* Poseidon, so she’d pretended to curse Medusa for her betrayal. Thankfully, the snakes and Medusa’s ability

to turn people into stone, had driven Poseidon from her. He didn't dare darken her doors these days.

Io, taken and forced to be Zeus's lover, was turned into a heifer to hide her from Hera. But oh, Hera had known her priestess and asked for her as a gift. Unable to undo Zeus's spell, Hera, instead, hid Io away with Argus the Giant standing guard. Though Zeus managed to reclaim Io, Hera never left her side, and even guided Medusa to her once Zeus had grown weary of his charge. Medusa took Io in, protected her, and loved her like a sister.

Daphne, the last to join their Serpentine Sisterhood, as they called it, had been pursued by man after man until she caught the eye of Apollo. She could do little to escape him, and so she begged for salvation. Some said her father heard her and turned her into a laurel tree. But Daphne still believed it was Artemis who had protected her from Artemis's own brother. After all, it was Artemis who had led Medusa and Io to Daphne to free her.

Asmodeus hissed, pulling Medusa from her wandering thoughts. She looked up as a bird suddenly flew past her face, followed by a second. Her snakes snarled, coiling to strike.

Medusa hissed back at them, ordering them to stop. A flick to Asmodeus's nose made him shake his head and slither in front of the others to prevent them from lashing out.

Io thudded down the hall in heavy boots. Her long, white hair flowed behind her, two bovine horns poking through the top of her head. "Sorry, sorry!" she cried and whistled sharply. The recall sent the two parrots flying back to Io. She held out her arm, letting them land. "What did I tell you two about chasing one another?" she scolded the birds playfully. She scritched their necks and gave them kisses.

Medusa folded her arms. "Dare I ask?"

"I was trying to feed Styx," she said, gesturing to the red eclectus perching on her arm. "And River kept stealing her treats." River, an amazon, squawked and giggled as she rubbed her yellow-crowned head against Io's arm. "I'm almost ready. Let me put these two in their aviary, and I'll finish up. Oh! And sorry, Ozzy!" she called to Asmodeus and blew him a kiss. "I'll get you a mouse."

Io chattered at the two parrots as she disappeared into her room.

Medusa chuckled to herself and leaned against the wall. She glanced at the certificates honoring Io for her many years of veterinarian work. Just

like Daphne, she'd studied her craft for years, and kept getting recertified, usually under a false name since no one would believe Io was a nearly immortal nymph. Then again, people believed in vampires and werewolves, so why would nymphs, gorgons, and goddesses be so odd?

She returned to the living room, still reminiscing and admiring their decor. Daphne had discovered many missing artifacts, including bones. Meanwhile, Medusa ran a business that researched and found antidotes for snake venoms. Snakes took a liking to her, so it was easy enough to extract their venom and study it. That too had taken years of research and schooling. Her favorite snake to handle was still the asp, mostly because other people were too afraid to go near it due to it being the supposed cause of Cleopatra's demise.

Medusa ran her fingers along her snakes, nuzzling the ones that moved toward her face, vying for attention.

Io reappeared a few minutes later. "Ooookay, birds are put away, snakes are fed, tarantulas are watered…I think everything is covered. Oh!" She walked up to Medusa, a purple gown with tule swishing along her knees. "Here, Ozzy." She held out a small, thawed mouse.

Medusa wrinkled her nose. "You're going to make him fat and lazy if you keep feeding him like that."

Asmodeus waved back and forth in the air then lunged, grabbing the mouse and working his mouth around it to swallow.

Io giggled and stroked the snake. "Nah, it just makes him cute and happy." She looked Medusa over and whistled. "Wow, suddenly I feel underdressed." She flushed and touched her hair then shifted the cardigan over her purple dress. "Do…am I dressed enough?"

Medusa smiled warmly. "You look beautiful. I think the black boots are a nice addition to the embroidery on your dress. Though, I think you're missing something."

"I am? What?"

Medusa held up a finger and went to the wreath of violets. She pulled two off and walked back over, clipping them into Io's hair. "There. Beautiful."

Io blushed and played with her moon necklace. "Thanks. I— oh, wow." Io's mouth dropped open as Daphne stepped into the kitchen, a paper in hand. "Why didn't you tell me I could wear pants!" she said, pointing at the pantsuit.

Daphne arched an eyebrow and placed the paper on the counter. “I think we should be a little more concerned about our mission, especially since *Apollo* will be there,” she added with a dark gleam in her eye.

Io sobered up instantly.

Medusa guided her into the kitchen and looked down at the paper. *Live Auction for* Ganymede and Zeus *Statue at Palace of the Gods Estates* read the headline above the picture. A marble statue of Zeus with eagle wings held Ganymede around the waist as the young man reached down toward earth with one hand while the other held a cup. The fear on Ganymede’s face was palpable, and it made Medusa’s stomach churn with anger.

She’d looked much the same when Poseidon had come for her.

“You’re sure he’s in the statue?” Io asked as she turned the paper around to get a better look at it. “I mean, didn’t Zeus banish him to the stars?”

“That’s what he wanted people to believe,” Daphne said. She pressed her hands on the counter, fingers splayed. “Initially he did turn Ganymede into a constellation, but you know how selfish he is. He didn’t want his cupbearer far from him, so while Zeus left the stars behind, he dragged Ganymede back down into a statue so he could admire him.” She tapped the picture. “*This* statue specifically. His magic made it so it would never break.”

Io frowned. “Then how are we supposed to free him?”

Medusa chuckled under her breath. “I do know a thing or two about turning things into stone. *And* I’ve learned how to reverse those effects, to a degree. Otherwise…” She nodded to Daphne.

Daphne approached a large painting of Athens and pushed it to the right, revealing a hidden safe. She tapped in the code and opened the door. Reaching inside, she pulled out a wrapped item. “We use this.”

“Uh, how? Didn’t you just say a god spelled the statue not to break?” Io asked.

“Yes, unless you use a tool gifted by a god against it,” Medusa replied and gestured to Daphne as her lover unwrapped an ancient harpe and handed it to her. “Perseus tried to kill me with this. Fortunately, Asmodeus woke me from my slumber before the fool succeeded.” She ran her finger along the blade. “One stab of this into the statue should crack it and allow Ganymede to escape.”

“Good, good,” Io said, pressing her fingertips together beneath her chin. “Just one question. How are you going to get that through the door? I’m pretty sure they check guns…and swords at auctions.”

Medusa and Daphne exchanged a knowing look. “All right, Asmodeus, like we practiced.” Medusa lifted the sword above her head and pointed the tip down. The snakes coiled around it. At the same time, Medusa pushed magic into the weapon, shrinking it, taking it down to a size no bigger than a hair pin. As the snakes settled, securing the harpe in place, their bodies morphed and appeared to turn into black hair. It was an illusion Medusa had learned long ago to help her walk amongst people. Her full gorgon appearance would have sent anyone running, except for some epic idiot who thought he could best her.

“There,” Medusa said and fiddled with her earrings to make sure they were secure. She’d need them to keep Apollo at bay. “Now no one is the wiser.”

Io leaned against the counter and reached up to fidget with her own hair. She’d hidden her horns. While Zeus had eventually turned her back into a woman, some of his residual magic still allowed her to shapeshift, another element important in Medusa’s plan. “Okay, so if Gany is trapped inside the statue, why on earth is Apollo selling it? Won’t that piss off Zeus?”

Medusa snorted. “Like Mr. Lightning Bolt ever comes down to earth these days. After the last woman he attacked shot and maced him, I think he’s still licking his wounds.” She looked at the photo. “Zeus knows he can whisk Ganymede away in that statue whenever he pleases, so it doesn’t matter where he goes. Apollo’s fallen on hard times monetary wise, so this is a quick way to make a buck.”

“Under the guise of donating to archaeological research,” Daphne added with a roll of her eyes. “I doubt we’ll ever see that money.” She reached into her evening bag and pulled out three tickets. She passed one each to Medusa and Io. “Our way in.”

Medusa’s phone buzzed, and she glanced down. “Come on, our ride is waiting for us.” She gathered up her bag and pulled a shawl over her shoulders. As Io hurried to catch up, Medusa noted the worried look on her face. “What is it?”

“Do either of you get the feeling this could be a trap? We’re starting to make a name for ourselves. Gany won’t be the first, nor the last person we

rescue.”

“And?” Daphne asked as she grabbed the door. “They hardly see us as a threat.”

“You sure about that?” Io ran her hand along the back of her neck. “I just think, if I wanted to lure out a gorgon, a nymph, and a former heifer, I’d make the trap public and irresistible to ignore.” Her hands slipped into the tule and her eyes widened. “Oh! Pockets!”

Medusa chuckled and placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll keep your worry in mind, Io. Be on the lookout for trouble, and keep our exit open. Daphne and I will worry about the crowd…and Apollo.”

“If you say so. I just feel like he’s going to take one look at us and *know* why we’re there.”

Medusa winked and reached into her bag. She passed a bracelet to Io and slid one on her other wrist. “That’s what these are for. They contain a glamour spell. You, Daphne, and I will be able to see each other in our true forms, but no one else will. To them, we’re three strangers.”

“Ooo, fancy. You really thought of everything, didn’t you?” Io said as she rocked the bracelet back and forth on her wrist.

Medusa offered a tight smile. “Perhaps,” she said. She wouldn’t put it past Apollo to do something nefarious and unexpected. If this was a ruse to draw the Serpentine Sisterhood out, she’d make him rue the day he threatened those under her protection.

They took the elevator down to the first floor then walked out to the waiting limo. They slid inside together. Medusa snuggled up against Daphne and slid the bracelet into her hand. Her lover kissed her in thanks and fitted it on her arm.

As they headed to the auction, Medusa went over the plan with them both one more time. She touched her earrings and the sword hair pin to make sure they were in place. She offered Io a pair of her own earrings with sinister venom lurking inside. “In case you get the opportunity to take him out before us,” Medusa said.

Io made a face. “Not much for using venom. But I’ll keep it…if I must.”

“You need the protection,” Daphne said firmly. “We can’t trust him. If we get separated, we need to know you’ll be safe.”

Io ran her hand lightly through her hair. “Worse comes to worst, I can shift forms.”

“Only if it gets to worst,” Medusa said. “Once we blow our cover, we must get out of there fast. We don’t know what condition Ganymede will be in. Or if Apollo will call in reinforcements.”

“I can carry Gany on my back if he can’t walk,” Io offered.

“Or I’ll sling him over my shoulder,” Daphne said. “We’ll see who gets to him first.”

Medusa nodded in agreement and leaned back in her seat.

The drive to the Palace of the Gods Estate wasn’t very far from their flat. Medusa looked out the window at the sparkling lights adorning the vast mansion, as well as the numerous cars pulled up to drop off their occupants. The people who emerged were dressed as finely as she was, which meant they’d blend in even better than she’d hoped.

The limo pulled to a stop and their driver came around and opened the door for them. Medusa stepped out first then gestured to Io and Daphne. “Wait for me at the door so I can give our driver some instructions.”

They nodded and headed up the stairway.

“You know, you’re going to have to tell them one of these days.”

Medusa glanced at the driver, dressed in a nice tie and suit. But she saw through his disguise. His fiery hair was braided down his back, freckles dotting his face. He wore an amused smile, his orange eyes filled with the power of the gods. The faint outline of wings fluttered on his heels as he shifted on his feet, clearly ready to be off. “I like to keep you as my ace, Hermes,” Medusa said. “Besides, if anyone else found out you were working with me, I’m afraid of what Zeus would do to you.”

Hermes scoffed and flashed a devil-may-care grin. “It wouldn’t be the first time I ended up at the tip of one of Zeus’s lightning bolts. But you have my thanks.” He bowed politely and tipped his hat. “Good luck, milady. Let me know if you need any assistance. Otherwise, I’ll be waiting for your signal, be it quiet or explosive.”

“Hopefully the former,” Medusa said with a sigh.

“Likely the latter,” Hermes teased.

She swatted his shoulder, causing him to laugh. “Scoundrel,” she hissed playfully at him before turning and starting up the stairs after Daphne and Io. Still, the smile lingered.

Hermes was one of the few good gods. He, too, didn’t approve of what Poseidon, Zeus, and Apollo had done to them, and to others. For centuries he’d helped Medusa ferry people to safety, with no request for payment.

That didn’t stop her from offering him money on some occasions, or venom, when asked, on others.

He had his own revenge list and was steadily crossing people off.

“What was that all about?” Daphne asked.

“Just making sure he stays close by in case there’s trouble,” Medusa lied easily. She pulled out her ticket. “Shall we?”

They walked across a vibrant purple carpet through the front doors and into an exquisite ballroom. Stained glass windows made up the ceiling, lit by crystal chandeliers. Her heels clicked on marble flooring with intricate designs that reminded her of laurel branches. She could practically hear Daphne’s teeth gnashing beside her.

Doric columns, like the ones used in the Temple of Apollo, supported the domed ceiling. Lavish red and gold draping hung over windows and on the backs of the chairs. While the auction itself was held near the front of the ballroom, an area was left open for dancing, and another covered in tables abundant in Greek foods. Cheese saganaki, hummus, stuffed grape leaves, baklava, moussaga, and wine all called to her. But she was here on a mission, not to gorge herself.

Io, however, was of a different mind. She walked politely over to the spread and began filling a plate while chattering amicably with some of the other guests.

Medusa shook her head, amused. Io did well holding conversations and getting vital information out of people who were none the wiser.

“Can he get any more narcissistic?” Daphne growled under her breath. “This place has so many things dedicated to him, you’d think Narcissus was the one hosting the party.”

Medusa fought back a snort of laughter. She squeezed Daphne’s hand and brought it to her lips. “They’re dedicating this place to the wrong beauty,” she said and grinned.

Daphne flushed, her nose wrinkling. “Ugh, Io’s corny jokes are rubbing off on you.” Still, Daphne smiled as she strolled toward the auction area, at least until they reached the stage. “Look.”

Medusa followed her gaze.

The statue of Ganymede and Zeus stood beautifully on display. Whoever had carved it had done a marvelous job. She could pick out each individual feather on Zeus’s mighty wings. Gany reached out, a stone tear sliding down his cheek, frozen in place for all eternity…up until now.

Medusa frowned. “He looks so scared.”

“Hard not to be when you know you’re about to be trapped in an elemental tomb with no potential means of escape,” Daphne murmured quietly.

Medusa grasped her hand again, and this time Daphne returned it. “I’ll never let that happen to you again.”

“I know.” Daphne leaned her head against her shoulder.

They stood there for a moment, gazing upon Ganymede. The urge to smash the statue open then and there was almost too strong to ignore. But Daphne’s hand on her calmed Medusa’s rage just enough to stay still.

“Enjoying the sight, ladies?” a familiar, coy voice boasted behind them.

Medusa felt a shiver crawl up her spine, followed quickly by a spark of anger. She plastered a smile on her face as she turned to face Apollo, or rather, Mr. Laurel, the benefactor of the night. His golden hair flowed around his face. A light beard graced his mouth, his warm brown eyes glinting with charm that did nothing to sway Medusa’s feelings toward him, especially since he couldn’t quite meet her gaze. Dressed in a fine black suit, he looked like he’d leapt out of a billionaire romance.

Daphne dug her nails into Medusa’s hand. “It’s certainly a beautiful piece,” she said with forced pleasantry.

Medusa nodded in agreement. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Laurel. Your reputation precedes you.”

Apollo laughed and shook his head. “I hope it’s a positive one,” he joked and held out his hand. When Medusa went to shake it, he gripped her hand and kissed it instead. “You know my name, but I’m afraid you haven’t introduced yourself and your lovely friend.”

“Wife,” Daphne corrected sharply.

Apollo arched an eyebrow and slid his hand out of Medusa’s. “Ah, I see. Pardon my forwardness, Mrs—?”

“Anna,” Daphne said. “You may call me Anna.”

“I’m Sera,” Medusa added with a light incline of her head. “You have quite the crowd tonight. The bidding should go high and bring you much fortune.”

“Which is a good thing,” Daphne remarked dryly. “It looks as if a few of your columns could use some restoration. Wouldn’t want to show off

the estate only to have it crumble on your investors." She looked at her nails. "Some would call it bad form."

Apollo straightened his back and fixed his tie with a perturbed expression on his face.

Medusa shot Daphne a look from the corner of her eye then chuckled. "Forgive my wife. I imagine she could cleave those columns in half with her sharp tongue."

"Sharp indeed," Apollo agreed and cleared his throat. "Ladies," he said, raising his glass of wine to them then stepped by to greet another young woman.

Medusa waited until he was out of earshot before she pulled Daphne closer. "Be careful," she whispered in her ear. "We're trying *not* to draw attention to ourselves."

"I know that," Daphne grouched and pulled her arm away. "That was me *not* drawing attention, because what I really wanted to do was strangle him and add his entrails to the decor." She smoothed down her pantsuit and flicked hair out of her face. "I'll fetch us some wine."

Before Medusa could say another word, Daphne headed over to the drink table. Medusa pinched her eyes. She knew tonight would be difficult, especially for Daphne, but she hadn't expected it to go awry quite yet. She rubbed her face and glanced sideways at the statue. To her surprise, a real tear slid down Ganymede's stone face. Was he listening? She pressed her lips together then used her magic to send a thought to him.

"*Ganymede, can you hear me*?"

Silence. Medusa waited a moment, but no reply came. With a sigh, she turned.

"*Wait,"* a faint voice called to her.

Medusa kept her back to the statue and pretended to admire the stained-glass ceiling. "*You can hear me then*?"

"*Wh-who are you*?"

"*My name is Medusa. Don't worry, Ganymede. My Sisterhood and I will get you out of there.*"

A ghostly whimper filled her mind. "*Please…if you can't rescue me, then end me. I can endure this no longer.*"

His voice was so small and broken, Medusa's fingers itched to pull the sword from her hair. But it would be better if they could purchase the statue and *not* cause a scene.

“*I promise, Ganymede. One way or another, you will be free tonight.*”

She withdrew her magic, but not before she heard him sob brokenly. In relief? In fear? She couldn’t quite tell. Either way, she wished she could comfort him.

Daphne returned with drinks and passed one to Medusa. Her hand paused and she frowned. She reached up, brushing a small tear from Medusa’s cheek. “What’s wrong?”

Medusa rubbed her other eye, not even realizing she’d been crying. “I heard him. He’s in there.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and no.” Medusa licked her lips. “He’s being tortured in there. He wants us to free him no matter what tonight.”

“Fr—.” Daphne blanched and looked at the statue. “Is it too late to just charge it and save him?”

Medusa glanced over as the doors to the building shut behind the last arrivals. “I’m afraid so. Come. It’s almost time to bid.”

Medusa and Daphne took their seats near the front of the room while Io stationed herself to the back right. They held bidding paddles with a lyre replica at the top, each bearing a different number. Medusa struggled not to bounce her knee. Even if they failed to win Ganymede, they could fight to free him, but she hoped it didn’t come to that. She didn’t want to put Io and Daphne in danger (though they were capable in their own ways of fighting back).

And then there was Ganymede. Ending his life was completely not in her itinerary.

The rest of the guests settled in around them with their paddles. Apollo took to the stage and gave a dull speech that Medusa paid little attention to.

The bidding started, but not on the statue. Instead, Apollo had several other items to offer his guests. Medusa added her bid now and again just to show interest, but she had eyes only for Ganymede.

“This next piece is a shield with the gorgon Medusa’s face on the surface.”

Medusa tried not to snap her head around to look at it. Daphne gripped her hand as Medusa stared at a twisted version of her visage displayed on a golden shield. It reminded her of Athena’s shield, except the goddess displayed Medusa’s face with power, honor, and strength. This Medusa’s

expression writhed in agony, her head cut from her neck, her mouth wide in a soundless scream, her snakes recoiling.

Medusa brushed her hand along her hair, finding Asmodeus hidden in her illusion. She rubbed him gently to comfort herself, and him, and felt him tongue her finger.

“That feels too coincidental,” Daphne whispered to Medusa.

“Let it be,” Medusa said back as the first paddle went up. “He can stroke his ego all he wants. Our goal is Ganymede, not some discourteous shield.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I don’t either,” Medusa agreed. But she wouldn’t rise to the bait. Even if it was a trap, their bracelets should still hide their appearance. They just had to play the part. She bid on it like the other items, but let another woman take it for well over $25,000. Maybe she’d melt it down and resell the gold, if it was even real.

“And now for the reason we’re all here!” Apollo said, spreading his arms dramatically. “Let the bid begin for the marble statue of Ganymede and Zeus!”

The auctioneer started the bid off at $200,000. Medusa waited for a couple bids to go in before she raised her paddle, and then they were off, paddles waving through the air as the bid grew higher and higher. Io raised hers to counter other bids, and then Medusa did the same.

One by one, people gave up until it was down to her, the woman who had bought the shield, and an elderly man.

“If we keep this up, we’re going to risk not being able to help others,” Daphne whispered. “Why not let someone else take it, and we just steal it from them?”

“Because we don’t know if any of the others here are disguised gods, goddesses, or people like us.” Medusa put up her paddle then glanced at her lover. “I can’t risk it.”

Daphne pressed her lips together grimly and nodded.

The bids crept up, but the paddles rose slower. Medusa held hers up one more time and looked at the other two bidders. They glanced at her as well. The woman inclined her head politely and set her paddle in her lap. The man wrinkled his nose and whispered something to his companion. After a long moment, he grunted and conceded.

“Sold!” the auctioneer shouted, pointing at Medusa with his gavel.

A soft, almost reluctant applause spread through the room as Medusa released a sigh of relief. They had him. Ganymede was coming home with them.

“Thank you everyone for your generosity!” Apollo said and bowed to the room. He smiled widely. “The winners should make their way up front to pay for their items. The party is not over, yet! There’s still dancing, food, and merriment to be had! Please join me on the dance floor.”

He swept down the aisle while people split up to either get more food or join the line to pay for their items. Medusa rose with Daphne and headed for the line. “We pay and then leave,” Medusa said softly to her. “I don’t want to stay longer than I have to.”

Daphne agreed. “I’m getting a bad vibe, anyway. I—”

“Congratulations!” Apollo exclaimed loudly enough for others to hear. He descended on Medusa and Daphne, grinning from ear to ear. “That was quite the bidding match. I’m impressed! I’m sure the statue will look fabulous in your home.” He held out his hand. “But first, will you honor me with a dance, Sera?”

Medusa looked warily at his outstretched hand. “I appreciate the offer, but we’d like to collect our winnings and be on our way. As you can see, the line is growing quite long.”

Apollo pouted and kept his hand out. “Well, I’m the one you’ll have to exchange the funds with, so you can beat the line.” He leaned forward with a smile. “One dance, that’s all I ask, and then we’ll take care of business.”

Medusa hesitated and glanced at Daphne who was glaring daggers at Apollo. She looked back at him. They were in the middle of a crowd. What damage could he do? “One dance,” she said, holding up a finger.

“Sera—” Daphne started, but Apollo grasped Medusa’s hand and guided her away.

“Don’t worry, my dear, I’ll have her back to you in one piece,” he promised Daphne. He spun Medusa then pulled her close, hand on the small of her back. “Quite the jealous wife you have.”

“She’s protective,” Medusa replied, trying not to squirm as he held her. “We normally don’t dance with other people.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asked, sweeping her across the floor. “Live a little! You only have one life to live after all, don’t you?”

Medusa faked a laugh. Yes, one life, but many, many years of it. She glanced over at Daphne to make sure she was okay, then to Io as the

woman watched her from the crowd. Io looked around then walked up to a man standing by himself. She offered her hand, and he grinned widely. He brought her to the dance floor, and Io carefully maneuvered them both closer to Medusa and Apollo.

Medusa made a note to thank her for the reinforcement once this was all over.

“How did you enjoy the other artifacts?” Apollo asked. He spun her again and pulled her against him with her back to his chest this time, one hand around her waist, and the other grasping her arm. His fingers brushed her bracelet.

His warm breath on her neck made her flinch. “They were quite a marvel. It’s an impressive collection you have.”

“And what of the Medusa shield?” He pressed his mouth close to her ear. “Did we get the features right?”

Medusa tensed and frowned. “I wouldn’t know, sir. I’ve only seen paintings and carvings of her.” She felt Asmodeus shift on her head, sensing her sudden unease.

“Is that so?” Apollo continued to whisper, guiding her toward the outside of the dancers. “Maybe we should take a closer look.”

Before Medusa could speak, Apollo spun her and shoved her hard against a column with his hand around her throat. Something sharp stabbed into her side, causing her to gasp in pain. Almost instantly, her arms and legs started to go numb. Her head spun, causing the room to do the same. Her heartbeat pounded then began to slow. Had he stabbed her with a toxin? She blinked dizzily, dimly aware of her glamor fading away as her bracelet was ripped from her wrist and sent rolling across the floor.

A deep, male voice sang an ancient song through the room. Medusa watched people drop where they were standing, fast asleep. Only a few guests remained awake, and those pounced Io and Daphne.

Then Apollo’s face was in her way. He pressed his body to hers, keeping her still, and wrapped a cloth tightly around her eyes before she even thought to unleash her gorgon magic on him. She couldn’t move! Her body felt frozen in place. His grip loosened before he dropped her to the floor. She struck it hard, her head bouncing.

“*Finally*,” Apollo growled at her and drove his foot into her side, causing her to roll. “The bitch and her little harem,” he mocked. “I had hoped you’d come take the bait, but this really ended up far better than I

could have hoped.” His hand closed around her throat again, threatening to choke her. “How many godly affairs have you ruined in your so-called quest for justice?”

Medusa gritted her teeth as he squeezed. The numbness was still spreading through her body, but she felt her fingers begin to tingle with life. She reached out mentally to her snakes. “*My loves, help me neutralize the poison. Free me*!” Another squeeze made her gag.

“Snake got your tongue?” Apollo hissed at her. “No last words? Very well. I should thank you for bringing my dear Daphne back to me, or should I say *Anna*,” he laughed. “Careful with her. I want her in one piece!” he called over to where Medusa could hear Daphne grunting and cursing.

Medusa’s blood boiled with rage. “Don’t you touch her.”

“Oh! Now she speaks.” Apollo cackled maniacally. “I’ll make sure to take good care of her. She’ll never leave my side, or turn into a tree, again. As for you.”

The sound of a sword leaving a scabbard rang through Medusa’s ears. She tensed and started to wiggle her fingers against her sides, her hands partially hidden by her dress. Her body fought against the poison, her snakes lending her strength to do the same. Asmodeus hissed to her, identifying the root. She had to force herself not to sneer.

Hemlock. He thought to disable her with hemlock?

Foolish God.

“We’ve had enough of your meddling,” Apollo said and shifted beside her, rising. The sword whispered as it cut through the air and rose above her prone form. “I’ll do what Perseus failed to do.”

“No, stop!” Io screamed.

“I’ll kill you!” Daphne shrieked.

Medusa closed her eyes and reached into herself, to the magic Athena had granted her. She was a gorgon, a woman serpent. She’d found cures for thousands of venoms, and endured bites and stings to research the cause and effects.

Apollo was a fool to think hemlock would keep her down.

Asmodeus hissed, and Medusa dropped her glamor completely. Her legs melded together in a long, serpentine tail. Emerald scales grew artistically across her body, acting as a layer of armor. She rose, the snakes in her hair shooting out to snap at Apollo and stall him. Asmodeus grabbed

her blindfold and ripped it off then licked the tip of her nose. Medusa blinked her green eyes and saw Apollo try to hack at the snakes biting him. She let them grow longer, one sinking her fangs into Apollo's leg before he could stop her.

Medusa grabbed her sword hairpin and yanked it free. It grew to its true length as she swung it around and parried a blow from Apollo's blade. His mouth dropped open in shock.

At the same time, Medusa yanked off her earring. She slammed it into his mouth and shoved him against a column, her hand closing over his lips to force the toxic jewel down his throat. She coiled her tail around his arms to keep him still. "You gloat too much," she hissed and banged his head into the stone. As he released a muffled cry of pain, he swallowed the gem which would dissolve almost instantly and fill him with one of the worst venoms she'd ever created.

A voice screamed in terror behind her. Still keeping Apollo pinned, she looked over her shoulder.

A raging white heifer with elegant horns decorated in violets charged two of the men trying to subdue her. Io was far larger than any mortal heifer and stood well above her captors.

Daphne grabbed someone holding her and hurled him into the singer who had put everyone to sleep; Morpheus. The son of Hypno yelped and went down under the weight of Daphne's thrown captor. She spread her hands, and a massive bow formed in her grasp. She fired two magical arrows, pinning one of Io's attackers to the wall. Green vines grew from the tip and wrapped the man up until he looked like a twisted, gnarled version of a tree.

Daphne panted and looked at Medusa. "Get Ganymede. We'll take care of the rest."

Medusa nodded and glared down at Apollo. His face had turned pale and dark lines crawled through his skin. He gasped for breath, his eyes bulging from the pain. Medusa threw him to the floor and slithered over to Gany's side. As a man ran up to grab her, she glared at him with her gorgon eyes. He turned to stone mid-run.

Medusa took on her human legs again once she reached the statue, but she left her snakes to keep watch. She touched Gany's frame and stared hard at the stone, willing it to come undone. She'd broken a stone

petrification spell before, but not one made by Zeus himself. *Please,* she begged. *Please work.*

The marble trembled under her gaze. A couple pieces flaked away, but her power barely grazed the surface. She gasped and bent forward a little, sweat beading her brow. Asmodeus licked the droplets away.

"*Don't,*" Gany begged from within. "*Don't destroy yourself on my behalf. Just end it, Medusa…Please.*"

Medusa frowned. She looked at Perseus's sword in her hand. It could work, or it could kill him.

She only had one chance.

"*Forgive me if this doesn't work,*" she begged Ganymede.

"*I'll forgive you if you end this pain.*"

Medusa flipped the sword over and grasped the hilt. Gritting her teeth, she slammed it down into the base of the stone statue.

A sudden explosion and burst of light threw Medusa to the ground. She hit the marble floor, the sword bouncing out of her hand and skittering across the ballroom. Asmodeus covered her eyes protectively while Medusa fought through the sudden daze. She blinked a few times and sat up, fearing the statue had been destroyed.

Zeus lay in a crumbled stone pile, but Ganymede remained whole, his body still covered in marble. Medusa's shoulders fell in despair, at least until cracks started webbing across Ganymede's body. Stone fell in tiny fragments, then in clumps. The statue crumbled, but as it did, a figure emerged, standing in the same position the statue had been in for centuries.

A young man with curly brown hair, tan skin, and a tired, exhausted expression wobbled and collapsed onto the pile of rubble.

Medusa groaned and pulled herself to her feet. She ran to his side and knelt, touching his cheeks. "Ganymede? Gany? Can you hear me?"

Ganymede opened his beautiful hazel eyes and looked up at her. All her snakes dipped over her head to peer back. "You look like a goddess," he mumbled weakly then his head rolled to the side as he fell unconscious.

Medusa hurriedly shoved debris away. "Io!" she shouted. A pounding of hooves answered.

"*Is he alive*?" Io asked worriedly. The heifer skidded to a stop next to Medusa. Blood splattered her pristine white fur.

"He is. Can you take him?"

Io nodded and bent her knee, lowering herself. Medusa cleared the rest of the marble away and placed Gany gently on her back. Io nuzzled him and waited as Medusa climbed behind Ganymede to help keep him steady. With a grunt, Io stood and ran toward Daphne, who had her bow trained on Apollo's writhing form.

The moment Daphne fired, Medusa grabbed her by the collar and yanked her onto Io's back too. Voices shouted behind them, and Medusa heard Morpheus begin to sing again, but they burst through the doors before his song could lull them to sleep.

They barely made it ten feet out the door when armed forces arrived, guns trained on them. Someone must have triggered an alarm!

"Now what!" Daphne shouted and raised her bow.

Medusa looked around until she spotted their limo. She pressed her fingers to her lips and whistled.

Hermes, wings and all, zipped to their sides in the flash of a second. Daphne and Io both yelled in surprise.

"Take us home, hurry!" Medusa said to him.

Hermes didn't waste time with words. He tipped his head instead and began to run. He raced in a circle around them, creating waves of magic, as well as a shield that prevented bullets from taking them out. Medusa clung to Ganymede, Io, and Daphne until the world blurred and they were whisked away.

Medusa sipped a hot chai latte as she watched the morning news.

"It's been a week since the heist on the Palace of the Gods Estate," the newscaster said, standing outside of the estate. "The building has been condemned for demolition, and the owner of it, Mr. Laurel, is still in the hospital recovering from the ordeal. He's put out a reward for any information on the thieves who assaulted his guests and shattered the famous statue of Ganymede and Zeus."

The clip shifted to one of Apollo sitting in bed, tubes inserted in his body. He had bandages wrapped around his head, and throat. He rasped as he spoke, likely a side effect of the venom. "My thoughts and prayers go out to the families impacted by this terrible tragedy. A night of merriment

was turned to horror because of these three monsters. They will pay for the lost lives, I swear it—" He turned his head and coughed heavily.

The video feed returned to the newscaster. "There you have it. He states that three women invaded the party and used a gas bomb to put everyone under while they went to work. Other auction items, jewels, and money have also gone missing. If you have any word on this, please call—"

"What a load of bullshit," Daphne said as she muted the tv. She walked over to Medusa, dressed in casual slacks and a hoodie. "I guarantee he robbed those people blind to make things look worse for us."

"Would you expect anything less?" Medusa said and pushed a cup of coffee over to Daphne. She yawned and sipped her chai latte. "I'd hoped my venom, or your arrow, would have been enough to take him out."

Daphne snorted. "You'd think. I saw my arrow go straight through his head. But he's a god…and gods are hard to kill. He'll probably just say it's a flesh wound." She rubbed Medusa's back warmly. "How are you? Any side effects from the hemlock?"

"No, I've tested with that poison several times before. It just took my body a bit to recognize what it was because I was in shock. I feel fine." Medusa leaned over and gave Daphne a warm kiss. "Not how I expected the night to go, but at least it's over."

"For now," Daphne said. "Or at least until the next person needs our help." She put her coffee down. "What I don't get is why the glamour bracelets failed. How did he know it was us?"

"Ah, we can blame Morpheus for that," Medusa said. "His abilities allow him to see people's dreams, and to a lesser extent, their thoughts. I imagine Apollo had him hiding, searching everyone who walked in for signs of trouble. The moment we stepped through that door, he must have known."

"Asshole," Daphne growled. "I wish I'd thrown more than just a person at him." She picked up her mug and took a slow sip. "You know, if we keep bringing in these strays, we're going to need a bigger flat," she teased.

Medusa chuckled and rested her head on Daphne's shoulder.

"You going to tell me more about what Hermes was doing at the auction?" Daphne asked.

A squawk in the hall saved Medusa from answering.

Io walked in with a bird on her shoulder. Ganymede followed her, another bird on his arm, and a third perched in his hair, gently preening him. His cheeks were rosy, the paleness of his skin bronze once more. He grinned at them as he approached, his eyes twinkling.

Medusa smiled. “Good morning you two. How did you sleep?”

“Wonderfully,” Ganymede said and gave the bird on his wrist a little kiss. “These beds of yours are far greater than my stone one. And I adore Io’s birds. They are wonderful.”

Daphne slid her hand over her mug. “So long as they don’t poop in your coffee.”

Medusa chuckled and swatted playfully at her. “I’m glad you're settling in well. Have you given any more thought over what you’d like to do?”

Ganymede hesitated and exchanged looks with Io. She nodded encouragingly. “Well, I’d actually hoped I could stay with the Serpentine Sisterhood and help you rescue more people. I’ve spent so much of my life trapped inside of stone, I want to give back, both to animals,” he said, lifting the bird. “And to the people.”

“He has my vote,” Io chimed in.

Medusa blinked in surprise. They hadn’t added a new member in their Sisterhood for decades. She looked at Daphne who stared down at Gany with scrutinous eyes. Finally, Daphne shrugged and raised her mug. “I have no problem with it.”

“Neither do I,” Medusa agreed and grinned at Gany. “Welcome to The Serpentine Sisterhood, Ganymede.”

BENEATH THE STREETS

ALICE HANOV

My shoes echoed on the cobblestones as I rushed down the icy path. The days were growing shorter as the chilly fall weather engulfed the city. Leaves were falling, and streets were emptying out earlier each day. As the sky dimmed, the voice in my head grew louder.

One job, Ellie. One job and you'll have enough money to get out of this mess.

The mess my brother got me in, but still. All I have to do is let myself get sucked into that weird maze the university uncovered under the city. I get in, get the orb, and get out. Nothing too hard about that … except that none of the people who have gone into the maze have ever come out. Then again, that's what the gun is for.

I patted the pocket of my hoodie for the third time to make sure it was still there. I hadn't practiced with it since dad died, but today I was thankful he insisted on teaching me.

I glanced around to check no one was watching me, but the area was deserted. I crossed the street and picked up the pace. Up ahead police tape was flapping in the breeze. I stuffed my hands into my pockets as I arrived at the alley. I slipped under the tape and kept my eyes on the ground as I hurried on. When I finally looked back up, there was a stone door before me. A bang echoed behind me, so I glanced back, but the alley was empty except for a garbage pail rolling on its side.

You've been down this alley hundreds of times. There was never a door here. So, where did it come from?

The red bricks were the same as always. I knew because of the three missing ones that reminded me of a skull face. But somehow a door had been cut into the bricks themselves, complete with an oversized antique handle. Cautiously I reached for the brass knob. The instant I touched it, a familiar freezing sensation enveloped me—like when my brother would put snow down my back when we were kids. The door opened of its own accord, and instantly, a stale smell wafted my way, originating from the open tunnel revealed behind the door. I instinctively turned, desperate to get away from the foul stench, but a gust of wind hit me from behind and pushed me toward the tunnel with increasing intensity despite my efforts to stop myself. As I fought to get away, my sneakers slipped on the frozen alley stones, and I fell. As if sensing my weakness, the wind snatched me up and slid me into the tunnel, slamming the door behind me.

Panic clutched at my chest as my lungs raced to keep up with the sharp breaths I was taking despite lying on my stomach with a gun jabbed into my ribs. I clenched my fists tightly and shut my eyes, forcing myself to count in my head until my breaths stilled enough that I could finish counting out loud. After I reached twenty-five, I was mostly breathing normally again. While I was fighting my terror, my eyes adjusted to the darkness around me. Surprisingly, not so much as a sliver of light came from the mysterious door. It was as if it had never existed, yet I could see flickers of light coming from behind me. Little flashes of red and gold danced before my eyes, barely long enough to make them out. The ground was softer than I'd expected and smelled musty. As I pushed myself up onto my knees, the smell of damp earth and something rotten filled my nose.

I covered my mouth to keep from gagging on the stench, which was worse than my cat's litter box in the summer. I stumbled to my feet, unable to hold back a groan as I touched my left knee gingerly, and winced at the sharp pain. A warm wetness slid down my knee, confirming that I'd cut it, again. With a sigh, I turned toward the flickering light, hoping it was a lantern and not a figment of my imagination.

Lucky for my sore knee, the path led downhill. The way I'd entered was nothing but a dark, solid brick wall. The further downhill I went, the more flickers of light I caught, but it wasn't until I rounded a narrow corner that I realized I'd been wrong about the lantern. A giant bonfire burned before me. Turning my head to the side, I walked around the fire. There were only a few logs in it—not nearly enough for the size and heat of it. Pausing on the other side, I turned to warm my backside at the fire and spotted another part of the path. This one seemed more ominous. Not only did the ground turn from normal dirt to black and maroon stones, but wooden torches were fastened to the walls inside. I rubbed my hands together as I crept toward my only hope of an exit.

As I stepped onto the path, the earthy smells were replaced with more rotten stenches-—some worse than others. Pulling my sleeve into my palm, I covered my nose and mouth before exhaling and moving down the stone path before me. I didn't even want to think about what could have caused that smell. Media reports had said at least seven people had gotten trapped down here in the last few weeks, and so far no one had gotten back

out. But I had something they didn't—intel on how to get out, *after* I finished my job.

My shoes squeaked as I moved along the trail. As soon as I realized the torches were not as frequent as I needed to see where I was stepping, I paused and reached for one. It took a few tries, but I managed to rip one from the wall. With the extra light, I spotted the carvings on the wall. Some were doodles, like you'd find in a notebook or textbook, while others were more childish and innocent. It took a minute for me to find the solid line that crept along the wall. Unlike the other images, this was only on one side and perfectly smooth as I traced along it with my finger. This was the string that would bring me to the center, and then out again.

An icy breeze seemed to follow me no matter which direction I went. My hair kept falling in my eyes, making it harder to carry the torch and follow the carvings on the wall. It actually felt as though I was making progress until I hit the first dead end. Muttering to myself, I started to head back, but then I noticed that the line wasn't on any of these walls. I rushed back to the next fork in the path to search for it. Having found it on the opposite side, I sighed with relief just as a rumble echoed around me. Slowly I glanced over my shoulder. A cloud of fog and dust came flying out of the last path. The moment I heard a gruff exhale from the other path, I raced down the section I was standing in, not wanting to wait and see what was making that sound.

Panic surged through my entire body, pushing me on as I tore through path after path—never letting myself stop for even a moment to decide which direction was the right one. My fight or flight had been set off, and since I wanted to survive, flight was the only option. I couldn't shoot at something in the dark, and holding my torch while I aimed wasn't going to work. I ran until my throbbing knee couldn't take it anymore, but even then I hobbled as fast as it would let me. When I finally dared to stop moving, all I heard was a deafening silence. My heart beat like a drum, and I had to cover my mouth to keep my ragged breaths in check.

When I get out of here, I'm adding cardio into my workouts … If I get out of here.

Gently pushing off the wall, I looked around, hoping to find a new torch. I'd dropped it when I ran, but considering how much I swing my arms when I run, it was probably the safer option.

I found a pair of torches a few turns later at another fork in the path. After snatching one, I held the flickering flames up to each wall while I looked for that carved line—my little thread of hope. When none of my options had it, I considered just giving up and sitting down to rest, but the sound of that *thing* sent shivers through me and I carried on.

Monsters. That's what he'd said was down here. And not monsters in costumes like you see in movies or the monsters who are just men doing bad things, but actual monsters. The kind they used to sacrifice virgins to, centuries ago. Well, at least I had that going for me. Maybe if they only wanted virgins, I'd be safe. I hadn't believed Max when he told me what would be hunting me down here, but now I did. I should have paid more attention. I only remembered two: a minotaur—a half bull, half man—and a chimera, some kind of deformed lion, goat, snake creature that a bored six-year-old would come up with.

Whoever had the bright idea to put them together in a maze was messed up in the head.

I crept down the path and peeked my head out, listening intently, but all I heard was my own breathing. Holding the torch up, I looked at each wall until I found the line again. Relieved, I started to follow it again, making sure to stop every few yards to listen for anything that might be down here. Coming out of another path that ended in a fork, I realized the stench from before was gone. *Hopefully that means I'm further along than all the others who failed.*

As I continued to follow the carved line, the sound of a pair of sneezes stopped me in my tracks. I glanced behind me, but nothing was there. The same was true in front of me, but then I heard something growl. It came from beside me. *It's on the other side of the wall!* Heart pounding and with sweat trickling down my neck, I slunk away from the low growls and tried to get away as fast as I could without losing my way or making a sound. As the path opened before me, I closed my eyes and prayed that the wall beside me wouldn't open. For once in my unlucky life, my prayer was answered. The wall remained solid.

I sighed in relief but started when I felt a hot breeze on my neck. I spun around, only to find a giant bull's head staring at me. Its eyes glowed red as the snout expelled more breath on me. It was foul. It reminded me of my brother's room when he hadn't done his laundry for a month. I stepped back, reaching my hand behind me to steady myself against the

wall. The beast took a step toward me. It towered over me by several feet. The furry bull's head was attached to a gigantic man's chest. The monster opened its mouth and let out a horrible roar, so I spun around and booked it as fast as I could down another tunnel.

Seconds later, another monstrous roar sounded behind me, and hooves pounded on the dirt. I pushed myself to run faster, reminding myself of all those people who had never made it out of here alive and of what would happen to my brother if I didn't make it back with the orb. The earth shook beneath my feet as that creature marched after me. More than once, it was almost enough to knock me down, but somehow I managed to stay upright. I veered around corners as fast as I could without injuring myself, hoping against hope that I'd lose it, but then, as I rounded another corner, the ground suddenly gave way … and I was falling.

It felt like I was falling for ages, but it couldn't have been more than a few seconds when I hit the water. Bubbles exploded around me as I expelled my breath in surprise, but I forced myself to kick my legs, coming closer and closer to the faint light across the dark. Gasping for breath, I broke the surface and struggled against my frozen legs and arms to swim to the edge of this pond. As thankful as I was for landing in water, I would have preferred it warm and not frigid. The rocks around the pond were all smooth, making it a real struggle to try and pull myself out. It took me at least four tries before I managed to get a decent grip, and even then, I had to wriggle my way up the slick stones. Exhausted and overwhelmed, I flopped on the ground and let my heart slow down.

When I opened my eyes, I could see the hole I'd fallen through. It wasn't large, but it was in the middle of the ceiling. Getting out the way I came in was not an option. Not that I would want to, even if it was possible. Who knew where that thing is. Sitting up, I looked at the cavern I found myself in. The pond seemed to be attached to a river of sorts since I heard water running nearby. I pulled off my hoodie, removed the gun and tucked it into my back pocket, then dropped the shirt on the ground in a sopping heap. Wringing my hair out as I walked, I started to follow the sound of the running water. The cave narrowed quickly to the left, and a faint light shone in the distance. It was the only option, really.

Echoes of my footsteps stalked me as I moved across the third open cavern. Each one was a little smaller but brighter than the last. The walls sparkled like quartz on steroids, and I couldn't help but be mesmerized by

them as I entered each cavern and stepped over the stalagmites that lit up the ground, guiding me. Their glow allowed me to move both safely and swiftly through the spaces.

The fourth and final cave was by far the most beautiful and shimmered like stars reflecting on a pond. There was another hole in the ceiling, but this one was near the side wall, giving me hope that I might be able to climb out. I made my way toward the sloping wall and ran my hands along the rough rocks, then exhaled with relief. Grabbing some dirt off the ground, I did my best to make sure my hands were dry before grabbing on to one of the stones jutting out of the rock wall in front of me. Once I had a good grip, I hoisted my body up so I could find a foothold and began the arduous task of getting myself out of the underground cave.

The opening at the top of the cave was large enough that I could easily fit through it, though pulling myself out was harder than I'd expected. Once back in the maze, I tried to get my heart rate to slow down and glanced around, hoping to figure out where I was. It looked the same as the part of the maze where I'd heard the growl and ran into the minotaur. Forcing myself to focus on what was ahead of me, I slunk down the path toward the only flickering light source I could see. Like before, this torch was affixed to the wall and, after ripping it off as quietly as possible, I held it up to the walls but could find no sign of the carvings.

Two options. Left or right. I stood frozen in place, trying desperately to decide which direction to go. There were no sounds or even a breeze to help me make my choice. So, I closed my eyes, spun in a circle, and walked in the direction I ended up facing. I navigated the paths with great caution, doing my best to avoid being heard by whatever might be stalking through the halls.

A sudden pop startled me, but I soon realized it was the torch I was holding. It was burning low, and I needed to find my way soon or risk being in the dark again. As I rounded the next corner, I found myself at a fork in the maze. Including the path I had ventured out of, there were four directions for me to go. I examined the walls on each path carefully and finally found the mark I was looking for on two of them. That narrowed down my options. Chewing on my cheek, I struggled to pick my next path until I heard shuffling come from one of the paths just as my torch sputtered out.

I turned just enough that I was facing the way I had come, then tossed the torch down the path and froze. Almost immediately I heard more movement and sniffing which thankfully covered the sound of my own footsteps as I dashed around the first bend of the path. As soon as I was behind the bend, I stopped and leaned against the wall, covering my mouth with my hands to silence and slow my breaths. A low growl and the sniffing grew closer and closer until the stench of rotten meat and wet dog was overwhelming, but I swallowed the bile that tried to escape and stayed perfectly still. Another loud sniff sounded, followed by a bark, and then as fast as they'd arrived, the sounds grew softer. The crack of a snapping torch echoed through the tunnel, followed by crashing footsteps, which grew softer with each step.

Not wanting to stay even a second longer, I ran my hand along the wall until I found the carved line and tiptoed further into the dark tunnel to see where it would lead.

At least it's not leading me to that beast! So it can't be as bad as all that.

I headed through the maze, taking one corner after the next, encased in complete darkness, until a hint of light appeared at the end of a long stretch of path. My emotions got the best of me, and I released the wall and began to hurry toward the glow as much as my bloody knee would let me. I didn't realize that the long path actually opened up to a fork, and the instant I hit that crossroad, a growl and hiss echoed. I'd barely turned my head before the chimera rushed toward me. I screamed and ran down the path before me as the beast skidded past it and had to backtrack.

Pumping my arms, I ignored the pain in my knee and pushed myself harder than I ever had in my life, praying to some higher power, which probably didn't even exist, to save me from my own foolish hubris. But then, as I rounded the corner, I saw it. A few steps ahead of me was a cavern that was lit up brighter than sunlight. Throwing myself forward, I crossed the opening, and the moment I did, the doorway I'd entered through turned to solid wall. There was an ear-piercing howl as the chimera smacked into the wall. Lungs on fire, I dropped to the ground, gasping for breath. I ploped onto my back and cried with relief.

Finally able to breathe properly, I sat up and looked around. The room wasn't a cave like I'd first thought, but an octagon-shaped room. Each of the sides had a doorway except the one I'd arrived through. Between them

all were torches sticking out of the wall, glowing bright enough to light the entire space. But then the center of the room caught my eye. A giant set of stairs. Warily, I walked toward them. They were an octogen too and led to a podium with a faint blue light emanating from it. I looked around for any sign of a trip wire or a trap of some kind, but they seemed to be normal stairs, so I climbed them until I reached the landing at the top. The podium was empty, but the glow was brighter up here. Stepping up to it, I found the stone was carved into a grove, and nestled in it was an illuminated blue sphere.

"That's it?" I felt myself scowl at the small, golf-ball-sized sphere before me. "I risked my life for this stupid thing?" I grabbed the sphere with my hand, and I felt like I was on fire. Black invaded my vision only to be replaced with flashing images. I saw myself drop the sphere back onto the podium, followed by Max's men beating my brother and then … his funeral. My mother sobbed beside a casket. I shook my head, and now I saw myself pocket the glowing rock into my pants; Max thanked me and forgave my brother's debt. My brother cleaned up his act and managed to get his GED before going to college to become a mechanic.

My hand was burning. It felt as if the sphere was actually melting my hand. Grasping for the podium, I dropped the orb. It'd felt as if I was on a roller coaster as the visions raced past me, and my eyes blinked at the bright light surrounding me. Holding on to the podium, I waited for my stomach to settle after that trip. Once it had, I looked at the magic glowing ball before me. I was not touching that again, but I'd left my hoodie on the ground after it got soaked when I fell into the water, and even though the orb was small, it wasn't small enough to fit into my jeans' pockets comfortably. Feeling around the podium and scanning the room for something I could use, it suddenly hit me. I pulled my sneaker off and stripped my sock from my foot before shoving my shoe back on. Slipping my hand into the sock, I grabbed the orb and pulled the sock over it. A faint blue light still emanated from the makeshift bag as I lifted it into the air.

"Works for me."

I pushed the sock through my pants' belt loop and bound it tightly. Smiling at my own cleverness, I headed down the stairs and stopped, realizing I had no idea which way I needed to go. The job was to find the

orb, get it, and get out. I had the orb, but the getting out part was still an issue.

I inched toward the doorway to the left of where I'd come in. Gently I moved my fingers around the opening of the wall, looking for any sort of symbol or carving, but there wasn't any. I repeated this step through the remaining six openings, and two of them had the line carvings I'd been following. Unsure of which way to go, I stood between the two open areas and stared. They were identical, and nothing in the room gave me even a hint as to which path was the right one. After standing there for what felt like hours, I snapped and screamed my frustration at the top of my lungs. A roar echoed back from the path on the right. Not wanting to let whatever that was catch up, I rushed into the left one, hoping it wouldn't be as dark as the others had been, but I was never lucky.

I limped as far into the path as I felt safe doing before I stopped and felt along the walls to find the carved line. It wasn't straight like it had been at the start, but rather it looped around like a bit of thread a cat had discarded after playing with it. Trying not to panic, I shuffled sideways, following the line down the path. A scraping sound found me, and I shivered. Fear flooded every pore of my body as I cocked my head, trying to determine where it came from, but with the stone walls surrounding me, the sound echoed and could have originated anywhere. As much as I wanted to stay here and figure it out, I couldn't risk it, so I forced myself to continue down the path.

My knee was screaming in pain, forcing me to go even slower and almost hobble along. At every sound, I stilled and held my breath, but at least a few of them were probably echoes of my own foot steps sending me into a panic. I'd been stumbling along for what felt like hours when I felt an icy breeze. *Fresh air.* The temperature down here was ideal, despite it being cold outside. Outside of when I'd fallen into the water, the maze felt comfortable to me. So the frosty wind gave me hope I was heading in the right direction. It spurred me on, and I sped up the best I could without making too much noise or hurting my knee even more. As I rounded the next corner, I found myself at another crossroads. I'd never forget the chimera racing for me, so I tiptoed to the edge of the wall and exhaled slowly before I peeked around and looked to the right. Another dark and deserted path. I spun my head the other way and was met with an identical sight.

Stepping out of my corridor, I assessed my options as I searched for my carved line and tried to figure out where the cold wind was coming from. The left path was the cooler of the two and had the line. My heart started to pound.

I'm getting close! I might just survive this.

Squeezing the orb in my hand through my damp sock, I started down the path. Despite my eagerness, I didn't make it very far before I heard shuffling. I stilled and listened, but it vanished. When I started walking again, the shuffling sound resumed as well. I tested it three times, and each time the same thing happened. Swallowing hard, I picked up the pace. The shuffles became stomps.

Hoof sounds!

I turned and ran down the path. Immediately the hooves behind me grew louder as they thundered to catch up. Veering to avoid a corner wall, I slid and almost fell but caught myself at the last second, only to realize I found myself at yet another crossroads.

"Damit!" *How am I supposed to find the carving while running away from a minotaur?*

I paused in the middle of the crossroads for just a second, letting my heart slow when I felt the wind again. Left. I turned, but then a gruff exhale sounded. The minotaur stalked toward me, and I slid my foot back. Its red eyes bore straight into my soul. I stood tall, desperate to hide my fear, as I reached for the gun in my back pocket. A second later, I thrust the gun at the beast. I clicked off the safety and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

I tried again, and again nothing.

Dammit! The water.

The minotaur stepped toward me, closing far too much of the distance between us, so I did the only thing I could think of and threw the gun at its ugly face.

My teeth chattered at the roar that escaped the beast as my gun struck it in the eye. Not wanting to see anymore, I hightailed it up the path. Hooves pounded behind me, and another roar echoed off the maze walls. It was gaining on me and was now close enough that its hot exhales hit my arms and neck. Closing my eyes, I pushed on. The end of the path had an arch, and something in me screamed at me to get through it. I was only

steps away when claws caught the hem of my shirt. Adrenaline rushed through me as I threw myself at the arch.

Fabric ripped as pain filled my entire body. Rocks tumbled down, and a furious roar shook the entire maze. I opened my eyes to find myself sprawled out on the maze floor. My knee throbbed, and there was a metallic taste in my mouth. I must have bitten my tongue when I fell. I swallowed the blood and stood up to try and brush myself off. When I looked behind me, I realized the path had collapsed on top of the minotaur. Blood oozed out of the rock pile that was bigger than me, and I stepped back with a cringe. The relief that filled me was enough to bring out a sob. Remembering the orb, I became terrified I'd damaged the stupid thing, so I checked, but the sock and its treasure were fine.

I turned away from the decimated tunnel path and headed the only direction I could. The air grew colder with each step I took. I shivered but inhaled, taking in the familiar scent of the city I called home. Limping faster, I turned a corner, only to find myself at a pitch-dark dead end. Holding my hands out, I moved until I grazed the wall and felt around. At first there was nothing but stone, but once I slowed my breathing and took control of my panic, I could focus, and barely a minute later, I found the outline of a door. And then, a knob.

Snow flew in my face the instant I pushed open the door, making my still damp hair freeze immediately. A gale of wind blew from inside the maze, sending me sliding on the ice that covered the alley ground. I was almost at the other wall when a slam sounded. Turning as quick as my shaky legs would allow, I looked up. There was nothing to see but a brick wall. The door was gone.

Could it have been a dream?

My hand dropped to my hip where my sock was tied up. I glanced down at the faint blue glow shining through.

Not a dream.

I shivered violently and wrapped my arms around myself to ward off some of the cold from the freak snowstorm. Fall was for leaves, pumpkin spice lattes, and Halloween, not blizzards. I knew I should head to Max as quickly as possible and pay my brother's debt, but I couldn't do it if I was frozen to death, so I hurried back down the street where I'd parked my car. But when I got there, it was gone. I could have sworn I parked in front of a pizza parlor, but now there was a coffee shop. I spun around in case the

pizza place was across the street, but it wasn't. I swallowed hard, as a sinking feeling grew in the pit of my stomach when a bell dinged.

"Hey, are you okay? You look like you need help."

I turned back toward the coffee shop to see a boy around my age, with brown hair, perfectly brushed to the side, and soft gray eyes. He was cute for a preppie. He wore an apron and was holding a dishrag in his hands.

"What?" I asked when I realized he was still talking.

"I said, you must be freezing. Come inside. Coffee's on me." He stepped aside, holding the door for me. With no idea what to do, I stuck my hands into my pockets and headed inside.

The place felt like heaven. Bright, clean, and warm. It must have been near closing time because the shop was deserted and spotless.

"Grab a seat." The boy motioned to the stools at the bar.

"You sure? I don't want to get you into trouble."

"No trouble. My uncle owns the place." He smiled, and I slipped onto the wooden stool, taking a moment to look around. The wood paneling was left natural, and the main decor was coffee shop art. There were fake plants as far as the eye could see.

"Two percent or almond milk?" he asked.

"Either's fine." I heard the swir of a steamer go, and a mug of steaming hot coffee with foam was set before me. I couldn't help but moan when my hands touched the mug, filling me with warmth.

I took a gulp, not caring if I burned my entire mouth and throat, and tasted a hint of vanilla.

"I can grab you the phone if you need to call someone. I know it's crazy my uncle still has a landline, but it comes in handy at times like this."

"And you don't have to worry about forgetting to charge it," I added before taking another sip.

"Exactly." He moved down the bar and slid a paper toward me. "The portable one is broken. I might have dropped it in the dishwater last night, so I'll get the one from the back."

"I'll be here," I said, smiling at him. He nodded and headed into the back. I grabbed the paper to check the sports section and comics, which is when I noticed the date.

January 15.

But I left on October 17.

I checked the year and realized the date was more than two years from when I'd headed into the maze.

I was in the maze for two years? But how?

Panic overtook me, and my heart beat so fast I couldn't breathe. I stood up to call for help, but my vision tunneled. Everything went black.

THE OCEAN'S CRY

NIKKI BROOKE

My nose twitches with the scent of danger in the water—blood. There's a hint of it among the bouquet of seaweed, crustaceans, sand, and the varied sea creatures that live near the Coral Castle. I sniff harder—trying to determine which direction it's coming from—and water rushes through my nostrils and lungs giving me a surge of aromas and oxygen.

"Here she goes again," Ramola says, rolling her eyes, "Amadelle the bloodhound." Her three best friends groan and giggle wickedly, flicking their fins so bubbles rush at my face. I huff the froth away and concentrate on the blood instead.

"There's nothing wrong with helping those less fortunate." Briatrix sticks up for me with her hands on her green scaled hips and a frown on her baby face. She tries so hard to look tough, but she only manages to look as adorable as a seal pup.

I place a steadying hand on her shoulder and look at her with such fondness my heart could burst. She's so young and innocent and she looks up to me like I'm her hero. But I'm not a hero, I just do what my instincts tell me.

Ramola sneers, bringing her face close to Briatrix's. "Except if Amadelle gets caught by the humans, then we're all at risk." Her voice is low and menacing.

Briatrix flinches away. "That's not going to happen." She glances at me, her eyes wide in question and worry; she's obviously never considered the dangers.

"I'm too clever for that," I reassure her. She takes in my words, then nods her head decidedly. She crosses her arms in challenge to Ramola.

"Well, she better not let Dad catch her either," Ramola spits, and her friends erupt in laughter at the shock on Briatrix's face.

"You wouldn't tell? Would you?" Briatrix's voice is small, disbelieving that Ramola could be so heartless.

Ramola inspects her perfectly shaped fingernails, painted purple to highlight the shimmering amethyst in her scales. Completely unlike my own nails, which are chipped and worn from rescuing sea creatures trapped in plastic and coral. Ramola huffs, "Only if I get bored. Lucky, I have better things to do."

I roll my eyes. There's no way Ramola is going to our father; he hates tattletales almost as much as he hates humans, and Ramola knows it. He doesn't want to hear about his daughters squabbling.

I sniff again and my head flicks to the west. The blood is stronger now, so I know the fish must be in real trouble. I'm about to swim away when Briatrix's little hand grabs my wrist.

"Can I come with you?" She says with a bashful look downward. My heart swells. Unlike our mean older sister, Briatrix has a heart of gold. She wants to help, and she's been begging for months to come with me. As much as I could do with the assistance, I can't put her at risk.

I wouldn't admit it to either of my sisters, but I never know what I'm getting myself into. I smell blood or hear a shriek, alerting me to a creature's distress, but it's not until I arrive on the scene that I can determine the problem. It could be a turtle stuck in plastic rings with its fins twisted, unable to swim, with the circulation cut off to its limbs. It might be a fish with a hook stuck through its cheek, being hurled away by a wire.

One time, a huge net captured hundreds and hundreds of sea creatures, all thrashing and desperate to get free. I almost got caught in it myself. I had to move in with the current, slash at the net with a sharpened shell, and then dash away as quickly as I could before the net collected me up too. It took hours. I was constantly in threat of the nets, but I couldn't leave those fish, turtles, and crustaceans to die.

I sadly shake my head. "Not this time, my love."

Her shoulders sag. Her bottom lip quivers as she turns away.

"Nobody wants a baby hanging around," one of Ramola's friends taunts, which earns her a glare from me.

"That's not what I meant," I protest, but Briatrix is already swimming toward the Coral Castle, her head lowered and trying to hide her puffy face behind her lime-colored hair. "You've upset her now," I admonish Ramola.

It doesn't help. They thrash their tails so bubbles completely envelop me. For a moment I'm blind to anything but froth, and when it clears, Ramola and her friends are yards away, giggling about their teasing.

Briatrix has already disappeared among the pearly arches of the Coral Castle, and the scent of blood still fills my nostrils. I can't waste any more time. With a strong flick of my tail, I surge forward, following the metallic tang.

The smell takes me away from the ocean floor, away from the seaweed and coral, and up toward the light of the human world. The further I swim

from my home, the brighter the ocean gets, with white streaks of sunlight slicing through the water like shards of ice.

I know I'm almost there by the amount of blood in the water. It fills my gills with every breath I take. It's spread out now and harder to pinpoint where it's coming from. I search the blue, squinting against the brightness coming through the ripples of the surface. My eyes aren't used to the sunshine, I rarely leave the safety of the deep.

A rumble of a motor makes me turn. I see a dark splotch among the ripples. As I swim closer, the boat comes into focus, as well as the poor sailfish thrashing on the end of a line.

No matter how much the sailfish struggles, the hook doesn't dislodge from his mouth and the wire pulls him backward. There are only a dozen more yards before the fish is pulled from the water. I race forward, heedless of the danger to myself—if those humans get a glimpse of me… No, I can't think like that.

I reach the sailfish and stretch toward the hook in his mouth, but the fish flinches away, eyes going wide with fear and blood pouring from his cheek.

"It's okay, I'm here to help," I say with my most soothing voice, trying again. But the fish thrashes harder. I can't get a grip. My heart pounds in time with the boom of the motor. The fish is pulled back further and we're too close to the surface. I sink down, trying to keep out of view—I should get further away, but I can't leave the sailfish to this fate.

I dash forward again—my fingers brush the surface as I grab hold of the wire and pull with all my strength. It doesn't break, but the wire lengthens and gives the sailfish a few more yards. I tug again, but the wire has gone taut and won't budge. Instead, it starts pulling again.

I jump when a hand grabs my shoulder. At first, I think a human is in the water—I whirl around with fists raised and my tail tense. My heart skips several beats until I realize it's Briatrix.

"You can't be here," I say, pulling her away from the surface.

"You can't do this alone." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"It's too dangerous."

"We can't leave. We've got to help him." She reaches for the hook and almost gets sliced by the fish's long bill.

"Careful!"

There’s a yank of the wire and the sailfish surges backward again. He doesn’t have much time left.

“Okay,” I say, relenting for the sake of the fish, “wrap your arms under his belly to still him,” I instruct, “keep well away from his bill and try not to crush his dorsal fin.”

She does what I say while I grab the fish’s head. He keeps resisting, but I can feel the strength leaving him; he can’t keep fighting the wire and the both of us. Briatrix grunts with effort, but she doesn’t let go, allowing me to finally get a hold of the hook. Slowly *slowly* I remove it from his cheek. As the hook is released from his flesh, the fish goes slack.

“He’s gone into shock,” I say. I lower him deeper into the ocean, further away from the boat. The hook glints in the light above us, getting smaller the more we descend. The roar of the boat’s motor becomes a distant rumble again, and it eventually moves off without its prize.

Briatrix strokes the sailfish’s dorsal fin, cooing softly, “Everything is alright now.” The beautiful blue fin suffered damage during his fight, with several places sliced and chunks ripped from it. Blood still pours from the hole in his cheek. My heart goes out to the poor creature. I stroke its head, mimicking Briatrix’s movement.

“We need to heal his injuries,” I say. “Can you keep holding him?”

She nods. Her eyes are rimmed with red as she keeps up her soothing commentary. With caution, I let go of the fish’s head, making sure he’s not going to thrash again and hurt either me or Briatrix, but he is still unconscious and doesn’t move other than the gentle flutter of his gills.

I hold my hands above his cheek and concentrate. My hands glow amber and gold, and my fingers tingle with the sensation of my healing power bleeding through the tips. The glow surrounds his injury, and the flesh stitches back together until the injury is completely healed.

I move to his dorsal fin and start the process again.

“Do you want to try?” I ask, while my hands glow.

Briatrix gulps, but holds her hands up to the fin.

“Imagine your power surging up from your heart and out through your fingers,” I instruct. “Concentrate on the injury. Imagine it healing.”

After a moment, her fingers radiate with power and she gives a delighted yelp. Her glow isn’t as strong as mine, but that will come with practice. Between the two of us, we quickly heal all his scrapes and cuts.

Just as we're finishing, his tail gives a wag, and I realize he's regaining consciousness.

"Back up, Briatrix." I pull her away from the fish before he starts thrashing in her arms.

His eyes land on me, it's not a thank you or any kind of acknowledgment, I'm not even sure if he knows what we've done for him, but I take comfort in seeing that his eyes are clear and alive. He takes off and within seconds, he's out of sight.

A joyful sigh escapes Briatrix's lips.

I place a hand on her shoulder. "You did well, Briatrix," I say softly, and she glows with pride, "but what you did was dangerous. If the humans had seen you, they would never stop looking for us. And what if the sailfish had cut you with his bill?"

Her face drops and she whispers, "But you could have healed me with your powers."

"Not if the injuries were too great. Not if you…" …died. Despite my inability to say the word, I can tell Briatrix understands by the way her eyes go wide.

I pull her into a hug, sinking my face into her lime-green hair. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you," I murmur.

She grips me back tightly, her little fingers woven through my hair. Suddenly, her body stiffens.

"Do you hear that?" She asks, pulling back from me.

I strain my ears. For a moment, all I can hear is the beat of my heart and the very distant rumble of the boat moving away from us. But eventually, my ears pick up another noise from even further away and my blood turns cold.

An orchestra of screams, cries, yelps, clicks, and whistles. It's so far away that it's barely audible. But it's evident that something very big and very wrong has happened.

I sniff expecting to smell blood. Instead, I get a strange chemical scent that I've only ever experienced near the humans' boats and ships.

"What is it, Amadelle?" The water trembles around her as she vibrates with fear.

"I don't know," I admit. "But you need to go home." I push her to get her moving, but she halts, opening her mouth to protest. "No," I say before she gets a word out, "you can't come with me. I told you it's too

dangerous. You shouldn't even be here now." I nudge her again. "Go home so I know you're safe."

She closes her mouth, my arguments sinking in. Abruptly, she wraps her arms around me and holds me tight.

"Be careful," she says, then swims away with her face puffy again.

I swim in the opposite direction, toward the screams. They're a long way off, but I push my tail up and down energetically, forcing my way forward as quickly as I can.

A small pod of dolphins swims past in the opposite direction. They're fleeing. A calf screams in terror even though she's surrounded and protected by the elders. There's a black slick along her back, totally covering her dorsal fin. What is that? My heart gets heavier with each of the poor mammal's screams.

I consider helping, but I trust her pod will take care of her and, instead, I continue toward the symphony of screams.

Ahead is a school of tuna. They thrash and cough, causing the ocean to churn with bubbles and something else. Something dark and menacing; the same substance I saw on the calf. It has that same sickly chemical scent I've noticed around the humans' boats.

A bubble of the substance floats toward me—a brown gooey blob—I reach out a finger and try to burst it. But instead of the bubble popping, the brown slides across my skin and coats my fingers—it's slimy and sticky and it doesn't come off when I shake my fingers. I engage my powers and the soft glow emanating from my fingers slowly pushes the substance from my skin. But it doesn't dissipate—it hangs in the water, a threat to any other creature that comes into contact with it.

I stare, horrified. The damage it could do. And it's everywhere. Brown globules float all around me, ready to coat and choke any unsuspecting marine life.

It's slathered on the skin of the tuna. I swim among them, gently pulling one into my arms and encircling it with my power. Once the substance is clear from its skin, I release the fish and reach for one of its companions, repeating the process.

After rescuing all the tuna, I skirt around the brown blobs, searching for others afflicted.

I find a seal with her eye black with the stuff. A turtle with the brown liquid clogging his shell. A lemon shark with the gunk in her gills almost

suffocating her. There are so many of them, I don't know how to help them all.

I watch as a bird sinks into the depths of the ocean. Brown and black completely cover his wings, his feathers heavy with the substance. It's too late to help him. He couldn't fight off the sludge.

My heart sinks with him.

I race upward with a powerful thrash of my tail. Taking a big breath, my head breaks the surface. The breeze tickles my skin as soon as my face is out of the water, a sensation I rarely experience. Momentarily, I'm blinded by the sunlight, but soon my eyes adjust. I ignore the eerie fingers of air across my neck.

I look around, swimming in a circle.

The slick substance coats the surface, moving with the waves and infecting everything it touches. It covers every feather of every bird. And they are choking. They're all dying right in front of my eyes.

I reach for one bird after another—gulls, herons, pelicans—I heal them and watch as they fly away.

Even though there are hundreds of birds and marine life in need of help, I'm tiring. My arms and heart feel weak, and even my fins are shaking from the effort. I'm using too much of my power.

Suddenly, I hear the unmistakable roar of a human ship. It's one of those big ones that always stinks like the brown muck. It's several times larger than a blue whale, with a rusty red and black hull. I duck under the surface and wait to see what the humans do. I watch through the murky brown water as the boat plows along. They don't stop. They don't even pause to help the birds. They ignore the distressed calls and continue on their way.

I realize the only time I've smelled this substance is around the humans and suddenly I wonder where this substance comes from. Did the humans do this? I dive below the muck, deeper and deeper, keeping it just above my head and following it down. The substance gets thicker and harder to avoid the lower I go, but I keep going, determined to figure out where it's coming from.

I reach the sandy bottom and the source. It's coming from a pipe made from the same hard material I've seen the humans use and the sludge is being pumped into the ocean like a geyser spouts water into the air.

They did this.

The humans are to blame.

Heat flushes my body as if a hot spring has vented into my veins. My father always said they were dangerous, and I knew they were, but this is beyond what I thought them capable of. Bile burns in the back of my throat as I swim back up and continue helping the marine life.

Although I know I can't keep going for much longer and my power is almost diminished, I persist. Pushing myself and helping as many as I can.

As I finish healing a spadefish, I glimpse bright green in the distance. I swim toward the mint shades. There's a hard thudding in my chest as I get closer and I can make out her shape.

Briatrix.

Her lime locks are streaked with black, the gunk sticks between her scales, in her gills, smeared across her baby-soft skin. Her fins aren't flapping, her tail is limp, her head is tilted back as she slowly sinks—just like the bird.

"No," I scream, diving for her.

I collect her in my arms, cradling her head in my hands. "Briatrix," I cry. She doesn't respond. I give her a gentle shake. "Briatrix," I call louder. She feels so heavy in my tired arms and my muscles shiver as I turn my power on. The glow is fainter than it should be—I've pushed myself too hard—but I need it now more than ever.

I grit my teeth and the gold power flows over Briatrix's body, enveloping her. I push all my power into her.

"Briatrix," I whisper, "come back to me."

I gasp as her eyes flutter. I keep driving my energy out and onto her.

"Briatrix," I whisper again.

This time, her eyes crack open a fraction. I sob in relief.

"Amadelle," Briatrix's voice is barely audible. I lean closer. "I'm sor… sorry."

"Shh, shh," I croon, "You'll be ok, I've got you. I'll fix you." As I speak, my power fades again, it stutters and falters, the glow becoming duller and duller, no matter how much effort I push into it.

Briatrix closes her eyes again, her breathing shallow; her gills are clogged and barely move with each breath.

"You're going to be ok," I promise her. My chest tightens. She's got to be ok. I pray to Poseidon, "Please let her live. Take me instead, but let her

live. It’s my fault she’s here. I should have known. I should have been more careful. I should have… Take me, punish me. But leave her alone.”

Briatrix’s eyes flutter again, and my heart skips a beat. I gaze on her hoping my prayers have been answered.

“You’ll be alright, my love,” I whisper, still pouring my power over her, every last drop until there is nothing left to give. As my light stutters out, I gasp for air, gripping Briatrix, willing her to open her eyes.

“Wake up now, Briatrix.” I say, “Wake up and we can go home.”

Her eyes remain closed.

Slowly, slowly, her gills flutter less and less, until they’re not moving at all. Every muscle in her body goes limp. Only my hold on her stops her from sinking to the ocean floor.

“No, Briatrix,” I sob, “don’t leave me. Don’t leave, Briatrix. Come back to me. Come back and we’ll swim home together.”

I hold her for a long time. I’m not prepared to believe she’s gone. I’m not prepared to take her body home and see the horror and anger on my father’s face when he realizes what I’ve done. I’m not prepared for Ramola screaming that she was right, that I am a danger to our species. And I’m not prepared to spend a day in the Coral Castle without Briatrix.

As some of my strength returns, I pour more light into her, but it rolls over her body with no effect—dissolving into the water.

Eventually, I’m forced to move by the substance licking at my skin. If I’m not careful, I’ll be caught in it too. That is probably what I deserve. But I need to take Briatrix home.

I sit upon a rock in the bright sunlight. I’ve been out of the water so long that my blue hair has dried and my skin itches from the heat. My whole body is aching to re-enter the ocean. Still, I sit and wait.

It’s excruciating in the Coral Castle, I can’t stand it a second longer, I don’t know if I can ever go back. The wails of mourning for my sister haunt me daily. Even Ramola’s nasty friends cry for her. Ramola looks at me with both pity and disgust. Worse are my father’s eyes; sad and empty —as if he lost all his daughters, not just Briatrix. And the truth is, he has.

None of us will ever be the same. The merpeople we were, died with Briatrix.

I wish my father had ranted, yelled, screamed. I wish he had punished me. He didn't. He cursed the humans and their machines, their dirty ways, but he didn't curse at me.

So, I dry myself out on this rock. Waiting. Waiting.

I hear it before I smell it this time. The loud rumbling of a human ship. I glance to the horizon and there it is, already big and ugly, closer than I expected.

I watch as it slides through the brown slime. They ignore the dead birds, fish, and sea mammals that litter the rocks and beaches. They don't stop to help. They never stop to help.

My anger turns to molten lava, erupting from my heart. It fuels me into action. I take a deep breath, deep in my lungs, before launching into a melody that echoes across the water. Long drawn-out notes of a funeral song.

Only this funeral song isn't for Briatrix; I still can't say goodbye to her.

I watch the ship change direction. It follows my song, coming closer. The waves lap at the hull, the bow plows forward, never slowing down, chasing my lullaby. They're close enough that I can see their individual faces; all wide-eyed with awe when they see my blue tail. They continue toward me in their trance. Until, with an ear-splitting groan, the ship crashes against the rocks.

I stop singing. The trance breaks and suddenly the humans' eyes aren't wide with awe anymore, they're wide with fear. They're shouting, screaming, praying, crying, as the boat sinks.

I stay on my rock, watching as their ship sinks and every human drowns. When the last scream gurgles into nothing, I turn my sights back to the horizon; waiting once more to sing my song.

THE PRINCESS CALLED DEATH

CATRINA BELL

CHAPTER 1

Everyone lies.

That’s something Father taught me long ago. But too few ask the right questions before they do. Every good liar should think before they speak.

Why lie? For good, for ill, or for personal gain? They each have different considerations.

Is it a big lie? If so, use sparingly or weave together with the truth so they are scarcely recognizable apart.

Who is being lied to? If it is to a lesser being, why bother? If it is to an authority, stay in control of the narrative. If it is to yourself, well, that’s another story altogether.

"Hel." Father's hand folds out toward me with a beckoning gesture. "Come along."

I exhale heavily and brace my hands against the cool stones of the ancient circle, leaning over once more to stare into the black.

Yggdrasill’s heart spring is an ancient well, running through the middle of the Great Tree. It is both the sole source of water and the place we throw our trash.

All gods fear the void, and so do I.

But my fear is not as great as my curiosity, my desire to understand what’s down there.

“We’ll be late,” Father chides.

I shake the dirt off my dress and make my way to him.

He doesn’t need to know why I’m drawn to the well, that the earth itself - a gift of my monstrous mother, no doubt - is the source of my

greatest powers. I want to be godly, like him, not something as wild and fleeting as a weed from the ground.

Childhood is a lesson in keeping secrets.

That is not something Father taught me. I learned that lesson all on my own. I've been exploring the well, little by little, only so far as my eyes can adjust to the lack of light. He caught up to me only after I'd crawled out. Quietly, I scrape the mud from my fingernails just before I reach him. I still haven't found the bottom or even a passageway, only mud and darkness.

Father grips my hand tightly as we rise the circular staircase of root steps encircling the stone and earthen wall of the massive well.

"Are you still cross with me for saying we were too busy to attend the feast in *Bilskirnir*?"

"They didn't want me there," I say, clutching the front of my dress with my free hand. My words come out steady. The purring creature hidden there gives me the strength to control the tremor in my voice.

Friends? Who needs friends when you have pets.

"They." He hums. "*They* is a nebulous concept and best examined further at risk of oversimplifying your antagonists. Hother and Odin, yes. *They* did not want you there and convinced Thor of the same."

We make our way further up until we reach an atrium. The open-air section is full of golden branches and giant leaves backlit by the sun, a lower section of Yggdrasill whose beauty always takes my breath away.

We must ascend though. The worst day of the month. Valhalla calls.

"Baldr and the ladies, though…" Father pushes off.

I take flight beside him. "Baldr is too good for this place."

"*You* are good." He holds both my forearms as we rise. Twisting up toward the light, we face each other, and he still holds me as if I were a small thing who didn't know how to fly.

Me, good? "Debatable," I say.

He grins. "That's my girl."

Letting one hand go, he smooths a tendril of my hair, dancing wildly in the whirling air. He tucks it into one of the two hair pieces tightly braided around my horns. The two large buns are my signature look, but it serves a secondary purpose, to hide my beastly appearance from all but him.

I brush him off. He'll mess it up with his sentimentality. Holding my hand, fixing my hair, telling me what to do and when.

I'm not a child anymore.

I'm thirteen.

Where Father is all charm and winsome cleverness, I am… not. Somewhat ugly, at least by goddess standards. I don't have his skills at deceit, unable to read social machinations as well as him. Worst of all, I don't have his powers to transform, always looking shiny and new, shifting into whatever form he pleases. It must be nice to be whatever he wants.

I *can*, however, create small illusions, make others see what is not there. It's as if a lie was a transformation. Not particularly noble, but beggars can't be choosers.

And for all I lack, I have my own armor. From a young age, the first thing I learned to hide, or rather control, was my face, not letting others see the thoughts and feelings boiling inside me.

Father insists I'm the strongest of us all. That where my brothers failed, I will succeed. That surely I will be the one to help him bring vitality to the world.

The other gods, as far as I can tell otherwise, are quite useless at it.

Humans perish for the saddest and stupidest reasons. They are born and die in scarcely a moment's breath, meaning nothing, doing nothing, hungering for violence all the while. And it's all incited by Odin's promise of eternal attendance in Valhalla. If only they knew that it's not all it's cracked up to be.

There must be another way.

We reach the top level and turn to the entry hall. I place my hand on top of his forearm, straightening my spine for Odin's new moon meeting of the gods.

"They fear you," Father whispers. "That is the only reason you were not invited."

Oh, the feast. Where all the gods made merry except me, it seems. Who says I wanted to go?

"I know how well we are liked," I say. "Which is not at all."

"They are obstacles to overcome, daughter. I'm working on— "

"I believe you," I whisper quickly. "Can you be quiet for once?"

Rather than chastise my disrespect as most fathers would, he snickers and pats my hand. "Don't want the guard dog to hear your secrets?"

My eyes cut to him. *How does he—?*

A growl rumbles ahead of us, and I feel it straight to my gut, quiet at first then gaining ferocity as we near the doors of Odin's great hall.

"Ah, there he is. Your friend," he chuckles at his own joke.

One of Odin's guardians. A large wolf. I bare my teeth at him and growl back. Not ladylike, but he won't see me shrink.

His eyes sparkle.

That one is a problem. Different in a way I don't understand. Unlike the other hounds that guard Valhalla with crimson eyes of flame, his eyes are an unnerving brown like a… well, like a person.

"He stinks." Father lifts the back of his hand to cover his nose as we pause at the entryway, crowded as each god is announced in turn.

It is the scent of death, but… nice. Petrichor, dried apples, a winter wind rushing over the husks of crops.

But to Father, I say nothing, just lift my chin and keep my eye on the hound as discreetly as possible in my periphery.

He watches me still. Despite having an entire hall of guests to consider, it is me he growls at with single-minded focus. The attention is unnerving.

"There's something strange about that one," Father says.

I agree, but I also don't want him to worry and treat me like a child. I can take care of myself. He needs to understand that.

"You like strange," I say to throw him off.

The hound is too strange by half, so strange I can't stop puzzling over why he sleeps in the field where the rest sleep at the hearth, why he watches me so, why he growls every time I approach his master's hall.

The other hounds don't mind us, some are even friendly. This one hates me like he's of the same mind as the rest of the gods.

Freyja's name is announced ahead of us; in a swirl of silk and rose-scented mist, the love goddess alights to the gleaming mosaic floor from her chariot. The hound guarding the opposite door slavers as she approaches. Its long tongue rolls out of its giant maw with a hungry, half-lidded smile on its face. A scarlet mist leaks from his eyes as the golden goddess, sparkling and verdant in every way, saunters toward him. She scratches under his chin with a dove's coo. Its giant head turns as she passes the threshold, dazed and desperate for more of her. Its nose makes it just over the threshold.

A flash of lightning cracks across the room to snap at its muzzle.

“No beasts in my hall,” Odin booms, seated on his throne within.

The lovesick hound whimpers and turns back.

The other hound, the strange one, grumbles at the scene, a half snarl on his face when he locks eyes with me once more. Not lovesick. Not charmed. Some darker emotion clouds him.

Everyone hates me. Why does a dog feeling the same disturb me so?

Father pulls me forward and up the stairs to the shadowy overlook. This is where we stand at Valhalla gatherings. Each god has a dais, spaced in a circle around his high seat.

The round room ensures no one is first or last. All gods have their place.

Well, except for Father and me.

It doesn’t matter, I tell myself. We like it better that way, perched high in the balcony above. They won’t give us a seat? We take the higher ground.

Our presence makes them uncomfortable, which Father relishes in. *They fear you,* I hear his voice in my ear. This time, the thought bolsters me.

They should.

“It’s only fair we have a dais of our own,” I say to him.

“Life isn’t fair,” Father says, eyes flashing silver. “It’s a game.”

Behind the cover of the banister, Father’s hand flicks to the side, fingers pointing to a spot in the rafters. In a mist of smoke, the small mass of brown fur twists in distress.

“Poor little rat.” I bite my lip seeing Ratatoskr, the messenger squirrel on his way about his business, transformed into a bat just to entertain my father. My fingers tighten over the pouch sewn against the front of my dress while my other arm clutches the column nearby, a branch of Yggdrasill itself.

Father’s gaze darts to me.

“Loki, god of tricks.” Odin’s lip curls in a sneer. His head turns slowly in my direction. Somehow, the disdain hardens, though I’ve done nothing wrong. I never do. “Keep your monstrosities outside.”

In the face of Father’s small cruelty and Odin’s barb, I grit my teeth and stay still. Keep my face impassive. I’m the strong one. I don’t show emotion.

“All-Father.” He bows with mock respect, and with a twist of his wrist and an alarmed squeak, the bat became a squirrel once again, scurrying up the rafters with a slip of paper between its teeth.

“Only trying to give our little messenger the benefit of swiftness through flight.”

“They are swift enough, and everything is fine as it is. We don’t need this excessive transformation.” Odin waves a hand in a circle. He prioritizes order above all.

Father inclines his head but chuffs, whispering only to me, “No imagination, that one.”

I love his silver eyes. Shining and deep and fun and scary all at the same time. My brothers and I look nothing like him, but we all share his eyes. The windows to the soul, he says, even though Odin calls them liar’s eyes, dead and gray.

Life isn’t fair, that’s for sure. I’ve known that since my first memory, when Jörmungandr was cast out into the sea. His only crime was growing too large and damaging property. But it was an accident. We were playing. For all his wisdom though, Odin’s punishment only served to give my brother more space to grow. They call Jör the world serpent now, stretching between realms with his ever-growing mass.

You think he’d receive more respect.

Fear is the only hint of respect my family gets among the gods. Fenrir, my wild oldest brother, for example. His crimes are never an accident though. They’re instinct.

Odin begins the meeting, as ever, with very bad poetry. It always rhymes and rarely makes sense, normally just stories of yore from his days of youth or exaggerated tales of his sons. Father features in a few. Even the ravens on his shoulder look half-asleep.

He sits on his throne, high and hazy-limbed. But only a fool takes their eyes off him, for he can turn sharp as a blade in an instant.

Metal disks clink together as the dancers surrounding Odin wave their limbs and circle their sundisk-covered hips. The charms on the valkyries’ wings tinkle as they move through the room serving ale and wine. Poor creatures, the lot of them. Bound in service to Odin, willing or no, sounds a misery.

Sweet smoke fills the air. Fermented cider of pears, honey cakes, and roasted hens. It is warm in Valhalla, some might even say pleasant, but

already I miss the comfort of the ground - the plants and flowers, the myriad of scents that are both life and death rolled into one dizzying mess.

Up here, everything is airy and light. Anything could float away on a breeze. *I* could float away, a small nothing of a goddess in a hall of powerful beings who knew their place. My place is surely ruin, cast out like my brothers at any moment. Odin only waits for the first good excuse.

Father watches the other gods, cataloging them for his own purposes with micro-movements of his eyes, before growing bored and turning to me.

“How are your powers coming?”

I unloop my arm from the tree, and the second I let go, I miss the connection from the wood to the ground. Since I can remember, we’ve lived in earthen rooms among the roots of Yggdrasill. It was a way to shame Father, show how far he’s fallen from the ways of the *Æ*sir and Vanir and their courts in the clouds. We live among the giants, but I prefer it. I am most at home in the dirt, the mud after the rain, seeing plants come up from nothing, again and again.

I’d never have discovered my power if we lived up here in the dizzying heights near the stars.

“Progress on reanimation.” I slip my hand into the hidden pocket at my front and pull out my little love. “Meet Níðhöggr.”

“A tiny dragon.” Father beams, one long finger unfolding to boop its tiny nose.

Níð growls and snaps at father, so I pull a twig from a nearby branch and give it to him to chew.

“He likes wood, but he doesn’t like liars.” I grimace apologetically as my finger traces his talons. One by one, I affixed them. They mostly fit, sources from other animals close in size, but it’s not perfect. Nothing is. He’s my secret, a manifestation of my power no one besides Father can know about. I found my little monster trampled underfoot and grew wings for him from my own, sewed on new scales like mosaic art, then breathed life to him with a kiss to his nose. He’s a patchwork of discarded and borrowed pieces. He may not be beautiful, but he’s mine.

Father chuckles. “Well no wonder he dislikes me. Clever little beastie.” His hand twists, and he brushes his knuckles over my hair again, lightly. A tender gesture I allow. “Just like you.”

His proximity to me alarms Níðhöggr, who trembles violently, jumps out to nip at Father, and hops on the banister, surveying the room.

“Níð!” I gasp, his name barely a sound. No one can see him!

Just as I grab for him, he takes flight across the room. His wings unfurl and with each flap, he rises higher. I can barely breathe. His scales gleam like the sea in afternoon light, green and blue and gold all at once. Magnificent. Scared beyond belief he’ll be seen, I’m also struck with pride. He’s been practicing short hops to stretch his wings but hasn’t taken flight until now. Just as he arcs to the left, heading to a shadowy rafter, he looks back at me.

The room shakes. “What is *that*?”

The All-Father is not spouting his sagas anymore. He’s shouting at us. At Father. And Níðhöggr is suspended in air. Terror grips his tiny limbs, his eyes white with fright.

“Another of your twisted creations?” Odin sneers. With a flick of his wrist, my pet moves toward the throne, hovering and ensnared. Odin’s fingers rotate in the same motion as Níðhöggr turns.

“Mine,” I shout, my voice echoing through the room, body strung tight with fear. All eyes turn to me, a dozen daggers I feel in my heart. My only hope is that by taking the blame, I may be punished instead of my pet for interrupting. “He’s mine. I’m sorry.”

The All-Father locks eyes with me, and even through the haze of incense smoke, I see the ghost of a smirk. With a snap of his fingers, Níð’s neck cracks to the left. His limbs go limp, even as his body hovers in the air.

No! The scream never surfaces. I ice over. Frozen. Disbelieving.

Odin waves his hand to the side, and gravity takes Níð’s small body. He falls, but not to the floor. He falls straight into the well without a sound. Into the dark, the unknown depths the gods fear.

He’s gone.

Cold rage sweeps my body. I drag in a lungful of air staring at the damp black hole before my glare falls to Odin.

“No beasts in my hall,” he says, then looks back to the crowd and resumes his poetry.

My hand clutches the front pocket of my dress, but it’s empty. I breathe in once, twice, three times. Evenly. Steady. Mouth closed. My nostrils flaring is surely my only tell.

He’s gone.

I let go, and my fingers straighten. This rage needs an outlet, and there is only one deserving punishment.

Father places his hand over mine, pressing it to the wood of the banister. His weight is a comfort, and the connection to the roots grounds me.

“Life isn’t fair, love,” he says, emotionless.

He’s never called me love. I never cry. But still, a tear slips free. I see the horror in his expression at my weakness.

“It’s a game?” I sniff, my expression turning into a sneer.

The rest of the godly meeting continues on as we stare at each other. Laughter rises then falls. I think the meeting is over, but I’m frozen in rage and grief, held in place only by my Father, the guiding force in my life, who’s kept me safe, who always knows what to do. But how long can we endure such games, such harsh rules?

Someone calls Father’s name behind us, shaking us both from our trance. Their voice grows closer as they approach.

“It *is* a game, and one day, we will win.” He blinks, jaw ticking once, before slipping on the jester’s grin he wears for everyone else.

He turns. His hand slips free from mine. His arms open to whoever comes his way. “Shall we play *tafl* then, dear friends and foes?”

And I’m left alone.

Alone but for that cold rage that keeps me company. The twist in my gut that’s migrating to my chest, howling like an ice storm, ripping winds full of gnashing teeth, pricking gooseflesh across my skin.

I vibrate with the need to act. To do something. To *stop* doing nothing every time I’m shunned or punished or the things I love are taken from me. To shout and tear my hair out and plunge down the well to find him.

To find a pet? I can hear Father’s astonished disappointment in my mind, see his gaze cut to me when I show weakness at caring for anyone other than *us*. And his discernment is the only leash I have, the cool, firm hand over mine urging me to wait it out, that vengeance is sweeter in secret.

The chill begins to shake and settle, like dirt in a water pail. It becomes a solid layer of ill will deep inside. I just want to go home, sleep for a century, and forget I ever created such a perfect little monster.

I focus my only true strength to its sharpest challenge - restraint. Show nothing.

Hide everything.

CHAPTER 2

I don't get mad. I get even.

The trickster god as my father gave me many advantages beyond silver eyes, a gift for mirage, and a growing ability to deceive. I'm also good with a lock-pick.

"Just… there."

The side window, reserved for the pretty valkyries to enter Valhalla with drinks, creaks open. I hold my breath, watching sunlight dance rainbows across the polished stone floor.

A beat passes, and nothing moves. It's silent as the grave.

I throw my legs over the windowsill and hop down. Despite the afternoon's warmth, the stones are cool beneath my feet. All I want is to hold on to a branch in my familiar spot by the banister, but I push forward, float to the center of the space and approach Odin's empty throne.

Perhaps I'll set the whole hall on fire, burn every scrap of wisdom he's collected. The flames would be a beautiful sight.

No. It would hurt the tree, and that realization nips that idea in the bud.

Vandalism then? I could paint something horrid on the main floor. But that wouldn't hurt him. He'd use it to punish someone innocent, no doubt.

Perhaps I could destroy something he values and leave it in pieces on the throne. Close, but I know what would hurt him worse.

I'll rob him of the thing he values most — his delusion that he's all knowing. It'll be easy. Simple. A small mystery he cannot solve, not with all the wisdom he pretends to have.

I will *steal* something. It doesn't even have to be precious to him, but better if it is. He'll always wonder where it went and be driven mad by the

desire to know what, to find it if he can.

But if I’m clever and careful, he never will. Yes. Yes, that is the plan.

I slink behind his throne and root around the nooks and crannies of shelves. There are bags of raven food, long scrolls full of sagas and mediocre verses, potions, and herbs. No, none of this will work.

Wait. One shelf has a groove. I feel around it and realize it's a drawer. A small hole is off to one side. A *locked* drawer.

I grin to myself and pull out the tiny dagger I used to pick the window lock. Child’s play. It pops open too easily, a pathetically obvious hiding place.

As I peel back the indigo velvet layer of fabric, what’s beneath it makes my mouth fall open in shock.

I immediately dry heave.

It's an eyeball covered in goo and tiny threads of muscle and sinew. Disgusting.

Then, it hits me, and I have to clamp down on my delighted laugh.

It's *his* eye. *The* eye. The one he writes poems about that he claims he sacrificed to gain wisdom. The one he threw down the well.

How… interesting. I’m not usually one for smiling, but as I stare at the evidence of his deception, one uncurls across my face. He didn’t sacrifice anything. He lied. He kept it. Why? It's mysterious enough I would steal the thing just for my own curiosity, imagining the light in Father’s eye if I showed him. But knowing how upset it will make Odin makes me nearly jump out of my skin with delight. *This* is my prize. This is how I get even. He took something precious to me. I’ll take something right back.

My heart races, imagining how vulnerable it will make him feel that a piece of him is just *missing*, that anyone could have it.

Everyone will be suspect. The paranoia will eat him alive.

It is enough for me. He’ll never pay for killing Níðhöggr for the rest of his endless existence, but this is a start.

I pluck the eye from its hiding place using the velvet cover and hold it up for inspection. Fresh, not rotted at all. Immortally gooey, I suppose. We’ll keep this in its wrapper for now.

I hear a snuffling sound behind me. A light tap and scrape on the stone floor. I breathe in sharply and turn around, nearly dropping the eye.

“You,” I whisper, full of fear, but making sure the word comes out harsh and angry. I’m not afraid. He should be afraid of me.

It's the hound from before, the one who growls at me.

“You plan to turn me in to your master? I have powers beyond your imagining. I can strike you dead with a touch.” Maybe. I’m mostly bluffing. My powers are erratic at best.

The hound prowls forward. There is no fear in his face, but there is also no anger, no snarl or familiar growl. He looks sad. Those brown eyes hold a tender emotion that again tells me there’s *more* to him.

I press my hand out five fingers flat, palm facing him.

“Do not approach me, beast.” I feel the revulsion in my throat, saying the word knowing that I learned it from Odin, hating that I just called anyone that, no matter the fact it's the hound that hates me. If he is a monster, it’s only in service of a greater monster.

“Stop,” I say. The cold power within aches to release from me, to defend myself from harm. Still, I hold back. Against every logical instinct, I don’t think he means me harm.

He stops and settles on his belly, laying his head between two giant front paws. Only now do I notice he has something in his mouth. He opens it and a small, rumpled form tumbles out. He nudges it forward with his long nose and a whining sound.

“Níð!” My precious boy. I gasp and rush forward.

The hound is forgotten. All I can see is the limp body of my little one.

I can bring him back. I know I can. I snatch him up and cradle his small form tenderly, the gross eyeball still clutched in my hand as well. My thumb passes down his face, his throat, his belly. Whole but not alive. Two glass beads are tied to his tail. Strange.

“Tiny feet. Tiny toes. Soon enough, my big boy grows.” It’s what I said the first moment I awakened him. Maybe it will work again.

Nothing happens.

I scramble across the floor to the wall where a branch of Yggdrasil peeks out from between two long drapes. One hand grasps it while the other cradles Níð and the eye.

“Alive, alive,” I call on Yggdrasill and the unknown below it, the source of my strange powers, for any tendril of life to spark through me to him. I put the full force of my heart into bringing him back.

His egg-shaped head twitches. A single eyelid blinks.

A heavy breath wooshes out of me. I nearly crow with joy until I hear voices outside.

The hound growls at my side. Before I can push him away, he bumps his shoulder against me, herding us both behind the long drapes.

I stay quiet, stay hidden, but delight watching little Níð wiggle. His nose twitches. He's not quite awake, but he's alive. I grip a new branch tighter and stay focused on him.

Odin enters the hall and I recognize Father's voice following him in. He's always up to something, but thankfully he's incredibly distracting.

"What is that smell?" Odin asks with a disdainful sniff. His voice has that tone to it, the same sharp warning when he'd struck Níð dead.

The hound's eyes dart around. He's afraid. I know what happens to beasts found in Odin's hall and so does he. I tuck Níð and the eye in my hidden front pocket and hug the huge wolf around the neck. I rub my cheeks up and down the sides of his face and even pass the top of my head under his long jaw, transferring his scent to me.

He blinks as I pull back, eyes wide with confusion. Whether he truly hates me or not, he brought Níð back to me. This is the least I can do.

"Thank you," I whisper just before I climb up the wall to the window I entered from and quietly take a seat on the sill.

Father finds me first. A crinkle in his brow is the only hint of confusion. Odin never sees it. As he turns, Father shouts, "Hel, right on time."

The older god grumbles. "Trespassing is a punishable offense. How did you open that window?"

"It was unlocked." I shrug. A white lie, one he'd never be able to verify.

"I asked her—"

"Silence." Odin's hand cuts Father off. "You *stink* like a dog. If you like to skulk around in smelly places, your punishment will be an easy one. From now on, you assist my hounds on trash duty." He turns to Father with a hard glare. "Why did she follow you here?"

"Apologies. She brings me a message." His finger crooks.

I drop to the floor and approach. They both grimace. I may have overdone it with the hound's scent, but the stronger I smell the more likely the real hound will go undetected and Níð and the eye will stay hidden in my pocket. I press my hand over my chest all the same, just to feel my little dragon's faint heartbeat as I lean forward to whisper in Father's ear.

"It was a lie for good and clever trick, I promise."

His gaze follows me out the door, even as Odin pulls out his pipe and settles on the throne.

CHAPTER 3

THREE YEARS LATER

It's trash day. The best day of every month.

I get to spend the entire afternoon with the hound. I'm quite fond of him, not that anyone would ever know it.

"Stay behind, beast," I command imperiously as we descend the last of the root steps passing from Niflheim into Midgard, the realm of humans. Asgard and Alfheim are far above, but Odin has eyes everywhere, black wings on the wind. I can never be sure.

We pass through fields thick with rye, tall enough to conceal the two of us, and only when the skies are clear and no one else is around do I let my hand stray to his head. I'd scratch behind his ears or trail my hand down his neck if I was braver, but this is all I allow myself. I'm afraid to press for more. Too intimate.

"You think they bought it?"

He nudges against my leg with a snuffle, and I laugh, nearly knocked off balance by his size.

We enter the same cave as always and set a small fire.

It took two years for me to dare follow him rather than part ways after the trash duty. He always split off from the pack, and it intrigued me. One day, I just continued following him into the cave.

He tried snarling at me again to chase me off, but I stood my ground. After a tense standoff, he changed. In a flash of fur and feral sounds, a

naked boy appeared. I didn't see that coming. He is a shifter. Not a powerful shapeshifter like Father, but rather something between hound and human.

That was the day I learned his name.

Garmr.

Today, after reaching the back room of the cave, I light a torch in the back. Only then does he shift. After a hideous cracking of bones and long howl, a man of eight and ten unfolds before me. He's naked as the day he was born, but that is nothing new.

"You're hurt," I say, just stopping myself from reaching out to touch the long gash from his shoulder to his ribs. I work hard not to show anything beyond mild curiosity. It is only by chance and doggedly following him around that I've learned a few of his secrets. Such as, he's a shifter. Also, this cave holds his mother's grave, and each month there are new glass beads and gifts left beside it.

Odin's hounds are not people. They have no personal belongings, so Garmr lets me have the beads each month. To me, he is the dearest of friends, perhaps my only one. But to him? I'm sure we are little more than compulsory companions.

He is beautiful and cursed.

I am a goddess bound for tragedy.

All I have are the hours I steal with him in the dark. It will never be more than this. I am sure of it. My life was never promised a happy ending. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"It's nothing, Hel." He shakes his head and rolls his injured shoulder, turning to wrap a cloth around his waist. Despite living as a hound every other day of the month, his modesty remains. Perhaps more for my sake than his. I never ask. "Another match with some new warriors. It is what it is."

My teeth clench. Odin loves to pit Valhalla's newly arrived slain warriors against his hounds to test their mettle. It makes me sick, the carnage and violence, purely for entertainment.

Garmr doesn't speak much about being a hound. I've often wondered, is he the only shifter or are they all? Who else knows about him? But I use my questions sparingly.

We settle beside the mound and start tonight's fire.

Our work for the day is done, dragging the detritus that clogs the well to a fire along the sea. The gods throw their bones and leavings down the well of Yggdrasil, but it begins to smell, and once a month, Sif sits on the floor of Valhalla and braids the hounds into her hair. She lowers them gently down the well, and with their mighty teeth, they gnash at the ancient stones until every bit of stuck trash falls below, where a net above Alfheim catches everything they don't manage to consume.

It's how Garmr found Níðhöggr all those years ago and saved him for me. Odin's punishment ended up being my greatest blessing, tasking Garmr and I to drag the gods' trash to Midgard to burn. Odin hates the smell and humans are easy to confuse.

The first fire is a fast thing, which leaves us an entire afternoon to sit at his mother's grave and just… well, we talk.

It's *wonderful*.

Not that he needs to know that.

Garmr picks up a wooden vessel set beside the wall, bulbous with a thin neck. He looks inside the opening, sniffs it, then brings it to his mouth and gulps.

"Uh—" I throw a hand out to make him stop, but his throat works through three long swallows before he sets it, and himself, down in a big, cross-legged heap.

"Good stuff." His grin is lopsided. He pokes at the fire, rousing it just so. The easy nature of that smile, still present on his face, makes me bold.

"Why did you used to growl at me?" I ask. It's something I've wondered for so long but never dared to ask. Can he sense my evil nature? Has Odin poisoned him against me? Am I quite ugly?

"Valhalla is not safe for you."

That… is not what I expected. My face must betray my surprise. Restraint is my hallmark, and I lose it around him. It is annoying, and my hackles rise. My hands press at my hair on both sides, ensuring everything is in its right place.

"I fear no god nor creature here or elsewhere."

It's a lie. I am scared often, nearly daily. Father has only taught me to conceal it well. Hold the coldness tight inside. Hold the rage even tighter. Keep it secret. Make it a precious thing that fuels me. Never let them see the real feeling.

“I found that out, didn’t I?” he says, and the sound of his chuckle makes me dizzy. “I'd hoped to scare you away from a place full of gods who hate you. Come to find out, you knew all along, and you don’t scare easy.”

“*You* should be afraid of me.”

There’s still a handsome grin on his face, and for some reason it’s grown. There are three lines on each side of his mouth. He looks so lovely in this form, it makes me, oddly, angry.

“Why are you not?” I ask.

“You are of death. At least, that is what the gods say in their halls. So is my mother. She passed away giving me life.” He glances from the flames to me and the firelight dances across his dark eyes. “I wonder, do you know her? Her name is Sigrid.”

I shake my head. “Humans die and are no more. If they go somewhere, it is unknown.”

“Unknown.” He cocks his head, not unlike the hound he is every other day. He didn’t expect that answer. No. He didn’t expect me to not know. I am *of death*. The rumors whispered among the gods must be so loud that even the hounds must hear. *The princess of death.* It was an insult Hother said one day that stuck. So maybe I smell like the earth, and perhaps I like to tinker with dead animals. It’s to bring them back to life, not that they’ll ever know that.

I should have concealed my lack of knowledge from Garmr. It’s best if he thinks I know things. I am a goddess after all. This time with him is disarming, the secret and intimacy of it all. It makes me soft.

"She's not gone,” he continues, patting the ground. “I feel her still."

What do I say to that? It is a touch of human madness in him, surely. They die and are no more. Everyone knows that.

“You're drawn to the well,” he says, glancing up at me, snaring me with his gaze. He watches me, I realize with a start. Not just here, but back on Yggdrasil, when he shouldn’t be. Is it as much as I watch him? “I've seen you casting objects in it. Are they cursed?”

They're trash, I think. Just things my fingers pick up and drop for no reason. A seed. A needle. A flower. A coin.

“Blessed,” I say, bluffing like my life depends on it. Another lie. I’m not thinking straight. That one was for no reason. *No,* it was to impress him.

His face softens. I let out the smallest exhale, knowing he bought it.

“You're scared of the well,” he says. “How deep does it go?”

“It is unknown,” I answer. Wait, he said I was scared?

“If I could fly like you, I would go.”

“I'm not afraid.” I bristle.

“So you would go with me?” he asks, one corner of his mouth tilting up, the same way Father’s does when he talks to those he’s charming. My cheeks flash hot. Is he-? He leans forward. “You’d keep me safe?”

I swallow. He’s talked me into a corner. Father would be disappointed to see this.

“Only trash goes down the well.” Charm was never my strong suit.

“You’re scared.”

“I fear nothing.” This conversation is veering wildly off track.

“No man nor creature, you said. But the well was not on your list. I fear many a man, god, and creature. Yet I would travel down there in a moment if I could. It is the only place she might be.”

His mother. His dead human mother consumes his thoughts. How tragic. “I like you alive much better.”

His eyebrow crooks and he stirs the fire until sparks dance between us. “High praise, my lady.”

He flicks a bead across the dirt floor toward me.

“Who leaves these here?” I ask, emboldened to ask more questions than ever before.

“My grandmother.”

“For you?”

He shrugs. “For me. Or her. Or something else entirely. I do not know.”

“How did you end up in Asgard?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I had trouble as a young boy in my village. I ran away one day, and Odin’s wolfhounds found me. I turned.” His fingers snap together. “Like that. No explanation. But it was easy, so easy to run with them. Much easier than…” His arm sweeps to the outside, the golden light of afternoon turning dusk streaming in. “The hounds know I'm different. I think, at least. They sleep at the hearth of the gods. They speak a simpler tongue with simpler thoughts. I sleep dug into the ground. I still speak as a human and think…

I imagine him running away, lost and confused. “Like a boy.”

“A man,” he says.

“Odin knows?” I ask. He must. The All-Father has eyes everywhere.

“I would be dead. A beast in his hall is one thing. A human? Little better than mud?” He scoffs. “Sometimes I wish he'd find out. Throw me down the well once and for all. Perhaps death is a kinder place.” He takes another swig of the drink left at the grave. “This makes my tongue loose. My mind spins. I know you said a dead human is neither here nor there, but I swear to you, Hel. She's still here. She's a heartbeat in the ground.”

His eyes are wide and flashing. This is the most he’s ever said to me. I feel as drunk as he must be.

“The earth is the connection.” I clap a hand over my mouth and mumble, “I mean, what do I know?”

“Is it?” He scoots around and grabs my hands. Gods, he’s warm and so much larger than me. His heart is a terrible drum. “The princess called death. You are the daughter of the cleverest of them all. You must know.”

“I know so little in truth,” I whisper. “The earth and life and death.” None of this Father taught me. It’s only what I feel when I stitch together animals and make my little pets. “What if the earth is all one connected thing? Never lives. Never dies. Only cycles. And we’re all connected.” I shake my head and try to pull away, but he holds me fast. Our fingers are entwined, both muddy and work used. It feels nice to have someone to talk to. He must think I’m mad with the way I ramble on, not careful with my words at all. I look up and that’s not what I see.

Only connection. Understanding.

Perhaps we’re both touched by madness then, burdened with questions no one can answer. His secrets are safe with me. Perhaps mine are as well. I peer up at him and whisper my ignorance, something I never admit to anyone, even Father. “Is it terrible that I don’t really know?”

His solid grip squeezes my fingers. It feels nice. “If you call it terrible, that tells me one thing is certain.”

“What?”

“One day you will.”

CHAPTER 4

"Are you happy, daughter?"

I sigh and hug a branch of Yggdrasill from our place above the rest of the gods, my eyes trailing over Garmr guarding the door, the valkyries and dancers serving their sentences, and the warriors promised a blissful afterlife but who instead stand sentry along the walls like ghouls.

"What is it to be happy in a world such as this?"

A question for a question is only what he deserves. We are no closer to improving anything. The world is full of tragedy where there could be life. Vitality, Father says. But the gods care for themselves and make games of everyone else.

After another look across the hall of the highest god, shining and golden and full of silent misery, I turn to Father. He's too quiet.

He watches me with an earnest, searching quality that leaves me breathless. Did he ask after my happiness because he cares? Does he have a solution that would see things change for the better, and our family restored?

Then, that smile stretches cheek to cheek, eyes alight with his signature chaotic mirth. A joke is coming.

He presses his thumb to my chin and quirks his eyebrows up. "Maybe you need a new world."

I shake my face from his grasp. Still a child to him, then. Dozens of glass beads tied in my braids clink together. I'm weary of his flippant response to every serious thing I have to say, his insistence on either plans for revenge or attempts to distract. How are we meant to make things better between all his schemes?

A new world? There are realms for ice and fire, then six more for each being - Æsir, Vanir, elves, giants, dwarves, and humans.

Everyone knows that.

“Are you tired, Father?”

His pleasant expression fades to a brief hard look before all the lines fade, revealing nothing. He could be a mirror of me in that moment. Perhaps I’ve always only been a mirror of him.

“If you’re tired, you’re dead,” he says.

“Gods can’t die.” Everyone knows that.

My response only makes that maddening grin spread again. I don’t have the patience for his tricky talk in a room full of beings who hate us.

I hug the column again, looking to my only ally as I finger the bright red bead I keep braided at my temple. It’s the first one Garmr ever gave me. He’s so much bigger now than any other hound, the strongest of them all. He's survived a dozen or more battles against warriors, other hounds, even monsters just for Odin’s pleasure, and has the scars to prove it. But what if he lost? Half human, half creature. Would he truly die? I’ve worried over it too many times.

“Your friendship with that dog will cause trouble.”

Dog. My jaw clicks. I shouldn’t have been looking at him so much. Of course Father would notice.

“You like trouble,” is all I say, staying cool, feigning disinterest as I gaze over the rest of the hall but see nothing.

“That I do.” Father leans on the banister, resting both forearms so our faces are close. Even still, his voice drops to a near whisper. “Speaking of, your brothers are coming for a visit.”

“Here?” My body flashes cold. I clutch at the secret pocket nestled at my breast, fingers closing around the eye I hold on to like a talisman. Níð is much too big to carry these days, but I keep Odin’s eye as my secret treasure and comfort. I never told Father, but it seems he keeps his own secrets from me.

Because if my brothers are here, something terrible is coming.

Odin begins the new moon meeting not with incense and poetry, but with the clamor of two dozen and more warriors rapping their swords against shield fronts, an ugly, cacophonous sound. Conversation in the hall dies down.

The All-Father rises from his throne. Both ravens fly in from windows to the east and west to land on his shoulders. He listens to their chirps and throws a quick glance at Father.

This cannot be good.

“Today, a ninth realm is born.”

The gods titter and mumble. Father’s hand squeezes mine.

“Hel means hidden,” Odin doesn’t yell, but his voice resounds. He walks to the well. “The girl is well-named to journey to the darkness below all known realms. The place needs a ruler.”

No one rules the void. It is chaos. Finally, I am being cast out as we knew would happen. But it is not into the sea or fetters like my brothers. I am to journey into the nothingness.

“Why, you may ask?” He takes a drag from his pipe and circles the well. “It is not a punishment. I have three good reasons. Unlike her brothers, Hel is obedient. For years, she’s followed orders, collected and dealt with the trash. Hel has shown she can be contained. A goddess too easily overlooked, she's never grown as monstrous as we feared. Lastly, Hel is resolute. The darkness does not scare her.”

The other gods’ eyes shift between Father and I on the platform and Odin below, murmuring to each other. My face is a mask even as my mind spins. Is this a way to punish Father, isolate him? Did we miscalculate?

I am being cast out under the guise of a gift.

Father straightens, and like a doll on strings, I let him lead me down the stairs. I’m numb. I see my hand on his forearm. I watch my feet move. The glass beads in my hair catch the light.

This is some joke of theater calling the void a ninth realm and claiming I will rule the unrulable. What will happen to me there? If I disappear, would anyone even know? No one has ever come back from the underrealms.

“I’m scared,” I admit my first weakness to Father.

The words barely make a sound as we pass the door. We could have flown down, but he chose this route down the spiraling stairs instead. It must be the ceremony of it.

I keep my eyes from flitting around, staying focused on the well and the immense old god hovering over it.

A low growl rumbles behind me. *Garmr.* Will I ever see him again? I make a sharp inhale and mean to turn around, but Father’s free hand grips

my arm.

Don’t show weakness. It would only hurt my friend. I'd never do that. If Garmr enters the hall, it is certain death.

“Life isn’t fair,” Father says. *It’s a game.* He doesn’t have to say it. The phrase is known to me. I’ve heard it countless times growing up. And what is Father playing at now?

“Trust me,” he says. “We are with you.”

Valhalla darkens.

A sudden shadow covers the north windows. Cerulean scales shimmer a mirage of ocean water across the floor, and the east windows black out. Gods and attendants gasp.

“Jor,” I whisper. My brother. The serpent who circles the seas. Surely it is only the tip of his tail that can even crawl up Yggdrasill for all his size now. My heart warms, imagining him hugging the tree the way he hugged me as a child, encircling the walls of great Valhalla just to be close to me.

“And Fenrir,” Father says. A howl splits the air, so pained and so terrible, it can only be my oldest brother, the terror of the gods. “We are always with you.”

I take a breath, unsure of what is to come but steady. If I am to be cast out, at least I’m in good company. I roll my shoulders back and school my features to face the All-Father.

I am Hel, daughter of the Great Trickster, sister of the world-ending monsters, the princess called death, and they will never see me tremble.

Odin’s nostrils flare, smoke streaming around his wizened face, eyes locked on me, half-lidded with derision.

Jor blocks out the last of the windows with a groaning creak of the Great Tree, and the hall falls into deeper darkness.

Only then does Odin falter. His gaze skips to the ceiling. Dozens of chandeliers swing. Their flickering candlelight casts shifting shadows on the walls. Torches blaze in hand-dug sconces. Valhalla is a large place with many windows, but there is still plenty of fire to see by, at least for one accustomed to shadows.

That’s when I realize something.

The All-Father enforces strict order. He surrounds himself with light and glittering treasures. He seeks knowledge above all.

Each truth holds an opposite in equal weight.

He’s afraid of chaos, darkness, and most of all, the unknown.

Father was right. He fears *me*.

He sends me to the place he is most afraid of.

Little does he know; the curse of my family cannot be escaped. Every time he casts us out, we are made stronger. Prophecy cannot be undone.

Another truth I cling to - the underrealms have called me for some time. What if I choose not to be like him, afraid?

What if his curse is my gift?

“Come and receive your crown. Then, you may descend.”

A simple crown of twigs, surely part of this farce, dangles from one of his fingers. Father stops and lets me walk the last few steps alone. Only an arm’s length away, I bow to Odin, unlooping my braids as I do, revealing the horns none has ever seen.

The crowd gasps. He places the crown upon my head, and whether he intended it or not, the trickle of some strange new power flows through me. I finger the thin braided wood. It is a still-living cutting from Yggdrasill.

“Give me back the eye, you little monster, and I will welcome you back home.”

Now the manufactured theater makes sense.

He can't call me a thief without revealing what I stole – his precious eyes – the thing he lied to everyone about. His infamous wisdom would be called into question. I have something he wants - the myth of his integrity. But I’ve spelled an illusion around the eye so well, he’ll never find it, even when it's right in front of his nose.

Odin has eyes everywhere, except the one in my front dress pocket.

We both straighten and face each other.

“Never.” I smile. “And you will rue the day you tried to bargain with Hel, gifting me a realm that does not exist. Because I will make your lie true. Just as you say, there is a ninth realm, and it will have its queen.”

“Curse you and your secrets to the nether forevermore.” He spits at my feet.

A familiar growl skates up my spine, but it’s not my brother. It’s louder. Closer. Odin’s glare turns over my shoulder. His lip curls.

“No beasts in my hall.”

I turn to find Garmr prowling forward. A predator in perfect symmetry, honed by violence but a protector to his core, with only one thing on its mind. And I think it’s me.

Odin’s arm shoots out. I grab and wrap it around me, biting down to disarm him. That only makes Garmr run faster, full speed, gnashing teeth straight for us.

Lightning strikes him. Odin only has one eye, but I forgot he has two arms.

The flash is blinding, so cracking and thunderous that Garmr’s body takes flight, twisting in agony. His large beastly form lands in a smoking heap at my feet.

I fall to my knees and cradle his head. “No. Stupid, wretched fool. I can take care of myself. I don't need help. I don't need—”

You. I can't say it. It's a lie, and for no reason, a lie to myself I could never believe. I do need him. I need a friend more than anything.

A sob wracks through me. He isn’t moving. There is no hint of life in him. His body is a husk of fur and flesh and familiar smells.

He’s gone.

I can take a lifetime of disrespect. A curse for a gift. To be feared instead of respected. But I cannot take another loved one ripped from me.

“Stop the killing!” I scream up at the All-Father. “It is madness. It is unnatural,” I shout at the entire gallery. “The beasts you hold so beneath you behave better. No animal kills for sport, for boundaries that are meaningless. Only us! And you mold humanity to this same sick pattern. What is power but an unreachable delusion?”

My horns grow, I feel them aching. I want to scream but nothing comes out. My head falls back at the pain. When my eyes open, a mist of darkness and the stench of decay slithers up from the well over the floor.

The crowd scrambles to the side of the walls. Warriors line up to defend the gods.

But the smoke and mist and the decay, it’s all an illusion. My grief made manifest. The greatest trick of the eye I’ve ever played.

A bone-chilling screech echoes from the well. Níðhöggr emerges in a flash from the dark pit, arching across the high ceiling and spewing fire at the crowd. My perfect boy. Five times again larger than me and still a child.

I brought him back. Garmr will be the same. I know it, like I know my own breath. My powers are new, but they are growing, no more so than the moment Odin placed this crown on my head.

I touch the thin ash branch now, and clean, fresh energy flows through me into Garmr. He is so very large and needs more. I crawl to the well, dragging him with me, and grip the first root I find.

"Alive, alive," I murmur. Inside the swirling black fog, safe from prying eyes, I kiss the tip of his long nose, tasting my own tears. Even in this form, he is beautiful. Perfect in every way. I'd never tell him that, but it's true. My thumbs travel up his muzzle to the knot between his brows, and I cradle his skull in both hands, barely able to hold the weight. "I'll keep you safe."

The cold expands, coiling around my insides. Not Yggdrasill. Not an illusion. This is all me. The dense ball of rage and hurt and loneliness I've held onto my whole life believes now is the time to make itself known, to grow and cascade. To become something new. Faster now, that dark, wild energy within splinters through my veins, shooting out of every pore.

Garmr yelps. When his eyes blink open, one is silver, one is red. He is not alive, but he is not dead either.

He's *mine*.

I spell him back to sleep and picture the mist hovering around us channeled into the shape of black roots, crawling and smoking up the walls of Valhalla. The darkness does my bidding. What is real and what is my power of illusion, I cannot rightly say, but I always keep my ignorance a secret from others.

Let them fear me before I go.

Let them see how I feel, hideous and dead to them. I pass my hand over my face and know what they see because I place the image in their reality. I am half decaying skeleton, half maiden. My horns arch up, like roots and antlers all in one. I am more terrible than my brothers combined.

I embody the terrible promise that even a god could die if I willed it.

Níð screams but I blow him a kiss. *Mother's alright.* He spits fire at the closest line of warriors to me and, snatching one in his great maw, disappears back into the well.

"You see why she must go? The monsters follow her orders. Decay is spreading." Odin licks his lips, breaths shallow, but his voice comes out as commanding as ever. "Hel shall rule the unknown space below the roots of Yggdrasill, taking in all who die ignobly, of sickness and old age with no valor to their name. The princess of true death."

“Queen,” Father says, and there is no smile on his face today. “She rules the underrealms, but her power stretches to all nine.”

“No god can die,” Odin says.

“How sure are you of that? Who dares to touch her deadly mist? Her power does not need your blessing. It simply is. You have granted her the realm yourself.”

Odin gulps, watching the shadows stretch and climb the walls of Valhalla, the massive form of the world serpent coiling tighter at his walls, each scale larger than the biggest boulder, Fenrir howling from outside the entry, now guarded by one less hound. The threat of my family enforcing this claim is very real, and the All-Father knows he’s trapped. More than that, I can taste his fear in the air.

“It is as I have foreseen. The ninth realm.” He gestures to the well, as if to encourage me down into it. I will not move until he accepts my rule of death over all realms, though. Father thinks it’s important. Finally, Odin closes his eyes. “Death is born this day, the beginning of the end.”

“The beginning.” Father looks at me and grins.

I try to understand. How much did he plan and how much is he improvising? He’s so good at both and so bad at showing me what he truly feels.

But Father can take care of himself. I have others who need me now.

Garmr is alive, barely, but we will never know peace above the ground where the gods dwell. We need a safer place. We will make one of our own from the mud itself if we have to.

Trash day is tomorrow, and the well is full of muck.

It will do.

I call on the bones in the well, the discarded creatures thrown out like trash, stuck in the roots and never finding the bottom. They are mine now. I call them together, a cyclone of detritus and death. They form into a cage around me then open into two giant wings, enfolding us, keeping us safe.

My arm wraps around Garmr’s thick neck and I make a great bone wing hold the rest of him.

Then, I rise.

The fear in these gods’ eyes used to scare me. Now, it gives me strength.

I hover over them all, surrounded by bones, dripping with carnage and held together with spiderweb wings, clutching the secret eye at my chest

and my wolfhound at my side. Níðhöggr is already safe below, lighting my way.

Never again will anyone touch what's mine. I'll keep them all safe. I'll keep them secret.

"From this day forward, beware all who call on Hel. When help was needed, you were silent, crying for none who needed your mercy." I sneer at the gods trembling before me. "Life is not fair, but death will be."

With that, I descend.

THE CELTS OF HELLA

AN ORIGINS TALE

C.J. PIPERATA

“The women of the Celtic tribes are bigger and stronger than our women. This is most likely due to their natures as well as their peculiar fondness for all things martial and robust. The flaxen haired maidens of the north are trained in sports and war while our gentle ladies are content to do their womanly duties and thus are less powerful than most young girls from Gaul and the hinterlands.”

— MARCUS BOREALIS

CHAPTER 1
THE BARBARIAN CURSE

Orla sat, crouched over the old pebbled altar in the underground well. Diamond patterns of light reflected from the water and danced across the jagged cavern walls. The warm, musty air clung to her skin as water dripped from somewhere nearby, joining the steady rhythm of her heartbeat and breath.

She moved the tiny, wooden figurines around as she studied them, whispering prayers under her breath. She whispered low so that the gods of her land—if they really were in this well— wouldn't hear her infidelities. But if the Tuatha De Dannan ever did roam these underground springs, they seemed long gone by now.

Still, she kept her prayers at a whisper. It seemed the respectful thing to do.

"Orla?" Her sister's voice bounced from the walls of the cave. "Are you down here again?"

Orla straightened and swiped the foreign gods away, shoving them into the pocket of her lambskin tunic. "I'm taking a rest, Maeve. We've been at it since dawn."

"Resting in a dark, wet cave?" Maeve ducked under the low stone canopy at the bottom of the stairs and stepped into the water's dim light. Her face was also covered in the camouflage warpaint of their clan—blue-and-black pigmented mud—and their knotted, red locks were caked with the same.

“It’s safe in here,” Orla said. “And I’m tired.” She was unwilling to go into detail about her recent need for extra rest. Maeve might fall down dead if she knew that it’d been two moon cycles since she last bled.

“Our enemies don’t rest, so we shouldn’t either.” Maeve examined her for a long moment, then folded her arms and pointed to Orla’s stomach. “Are you going to tell me what you’re carrying in there?”

Orla froze. She stared at her sister as if she’d been caught eating the last morsel of meat before winter.

“You think I don’t see you carrying those foreign gods everywhere?” Maeve said, and Orla exhaled. She shoved the foreign gods down farther into her pocket.

“They’re just some rocks I plan on sharpening into arrowheads.”

“You won’t even use bronze arrowheads now that the Grecian traders brought us iron,” Maeve said with a grimace. “You expect me to believe you’ll use stone?”

“Stone can be sharpened well enough to shave that mustache of yours.” Orla pushed herself up with a grunt and walked past her sister toward the steps.

“This is the gate of Brigid, you fool.” Maeve followed her. “You’re lucky the walls don’t crumble on your head bringing foreign gods in here.”

“If any god lives beyond that well, they’re either indifferent or deaf.”

“Bite off your tongue before you speak of the Tuatha like that,” Maeve spat. “Just because you spread your legs for an oily Grecian doesn’t mean his gods favor you.”

Orla paused at the base of the steps and faced her sister. “That oily Grecian’s brought us more prosperity than all of the Tuatha De Dannan combined. At least his gods do something.”

“Like what?” Maeve guffawed. “Send him into raging seas to make other men rich?”

“No.” Orla turned away and ascended the steps toward the mouth of the cave. She could already hear those damned birds cawing. “They see Acacius safely to our shores to trade our wool and fur for iron, oil and wine— the same iron, oil and wine that’s brought our prosperity.”

The light from the cave’s mouth hit her eyes and she shielded them. Shadows circled on the ground from those insidious birds, their shrill cries moaning like the opening notes of a funeral dirge. She stepped outside and Maeve grabbed her by the wrist, halting her.

“We don’t have time for this, Maeve,” Orla said. “We need to check the perimeter.”

“The Grecians call us barbarians, Orla. Beasts. How can you worship the gods of Hella?”

Orla yanked her wrist free and wiped some of the caked, dried mud from her face. “Look at us, Maeve. We are beasts.”

Or at least, that’s what they’d become since nearly all the men of their clan had fallen. The stronger the man, the easier he succumbed to the fever. “Blackbird fever” they called it, because the moment the men began to fall ill, those damned crows appeared.

The sisters made their way through the emerald field in silence where Orla’d slain a buck the day before. But today wasn’t for hunting. Today they were prowling the eastern border of their land to canvas for any signs of an impending attack: hoof prints from potential scouts or rising smoke from a nearby campfire. The crows circled wherever they went, a constant reminder of the growing danger to them and anyone still left that they loved.

“THERE’S NOTHING OUT HERE,” Orla finally said as the sun began its descent. “At least not for miles. We should get back to the port.”

“Back to the port,” Maeve mocked and walked ahead into the brush. She whipped weeds from their path with her spear. “I’m sure that has nothing to do with the fact that Acacius’ ship is expected back soon. Your lust for foreigners is sickening.”

“My lust for foreigners is pragmatic,” Orla said. “Acacius is a good man; he won’t trade with anyone who sacks our land.” Orla ducked under some low hanging vines and added, “Besides, the trading port makes us a target, so we need to keep close watch on it.”

“Acacius will trade with anyone who can turn him a profit,” Maeve guffawed. “Have you heard his sailors brag about the perfumed skin and smooth hands of the Grecian women? He only beds you abroad because you’re a step above livestock.”

Orla gritted her teeth. “Like you wouldn’t want perfumed skin and smooth hands too. Did you ever stop and ask yourself why Grecian women

are so comfortable and safe that their hands go soft?" She waited, but Maeve didn't answer. "I'll tell you why," Orla continued, "it's because Grecian tribes work together to make life easier. Unlike the chaos of these lands. Even their wars are organized."

"War is never organized," Maeve said.

"But it is." Orla hopped over a rock and caught up with her sister. "In Hella, men meet men on the battlefield—sword to sword, shield to shield. After that they come to agreements and move on. Our enemies jump from bushes like screaming banshees and cannibalize man, woman, and child over a herd of goats."

"If you hate your kind so much, maybe you should board that trading boat and let them sell you too."

Orla bit her tongue. You couldn't make people see reason when reason stood at odds with their pride. The fact was that their clan prospered because their father—and chieftain—was nothing like the clans of this land. He welcomed the Grecian traders while the other tribes attacked anyone who came near their shores. He built the pier and port with her brothers, even paving paths with stone, just like the Grecians did in Hella. In turn, her clan acquired things like olive oil and fig wine, which they were able to trade on the mainland for gold and silver. As far as she knew, their port was the only one on the island. It was favor by proxy from the Grecian gods of Acacius.

But her dear father and brothers were carrion now, among the first to fall to the blackbird fever. And the other tribes coveted what they had, even though they possessed neither the character nor intelligence to maintain it.

The shrill caws of circling crows began to mix with the sounds of gulls as they left the dense forest and drew nearer to the port. Cool, salty air with just a twinge of fish infiltrated her nose while they passed through their settlement of small stone cottages.

She surveyed the humble shanties with their straw roofs and dreamed of the settlements Acacius had described—cities, he called them—that lie along the seas that bordered Hella. He talked of indoor gardens and irrigation systems. Communities where people combined their resources rather than constantly fighting and destroying what little they had.

"Look at them." Maeve's voice jerked Orla from her musing as she motioned to the women scattered around the settlement working. Their

eyelids drooped as they slumped over their tasks, daily looking worse for the wear. “They’re drained,” Maeve said. “Chopping wood and tilling while they tend both herds and children. We can’t keep going like this.”

“If we don’t take up the mantle, who will? Any man still breathing is flat on his back at home, waiting to die.”

“The damned fever is a curse.” Maeve shot her a glare, the angles of her black-and-blue warpaint forming an angry expression at her brow. “Probably the result of your romps with exotic gods and their pets.”

“Kill all the men because I romped with a trader?” Orla laughed out loud, but then went silent and stiff as they passed Biddy Early. Biddy sat in the grass with her spindly gray hair, hunched over and weaving something.

Biddy had shown up just a few months prior. Orla’s father had claimed she was a distant relative of his parents, and welcomed her with open arms into their close-knit clan. Her sagging, hollow face was always stretched into a sickly sweet smile, and shallow flattery gushed from her thin lips any time she spoke. The white film that nearly covered her brown eyes made them impossible to read, and made Orla wonder what thoughts really lived behind them. Nobody was that positive all the time.

“What’s your problem with the old woman?” Maeve observed Orla’s face with a grimace. “She has great wisdom—ancient wisdom— and she’s kind. You could learn a thing or two from her.”

Orla opened her mouth to insult her sister, but shut it when she noticed Alina, their sister of only ten years, running toward them. Her curly red hair bounced as she ran, and her clean, freckled face still spoke to innocence. She didn’t have to take up arms the way Orla and Maeve, and the other girls who’d entered their prime, had to.

“What did I tell you about wearing gold and fine stones around your neck?” Orla knelt down to receive her sister, looking straight into her bright green eyes. “If we’re attacked, that jewelry makes you the first target. You’re not the daughter of a chieftain anymore. Your father is dead —as is our security. Now take it off.”

“I’m sorry.” Alina’s eyes fell as she removed the necklace, but they lit up again with urgency. “There was a skirmish to the south. The men who attacked us were a dozen deep, maybe more.”

Orla stood up and looked at Maeve.

“Did we lose anyone?” Maeve rasped. Her voice was tentative, like she didn’t want to hear the answer. Alina shook her head and the two older

sisters exhaled.

“It was some kind of miracle…” Alina’s eyes went wide. “Biddy Early said our gods must’ve finally heard our prayers.” Her eyes darted between Orla and Maeve as she recounted the story. “Half a dozen of our women were ambushed by twice the amount of men, twice their size, but they didn’t kill any of ours… they just subdued them and waited. Then they let them go!”

Maeve looked at Orla and smirked. “Our gods protected us. Ready to atone for your blasphemies yet?”

Orla grimaced and knelt to Alina again. “What about the port? Has anyone breached the port?”

Alina shook her head, her orange curls bouncing. “No, but the merchant ship crossed the horizon this morning. The Grecians must be docked by now.”

“Thank the gods,” Orla said. “Listen to me very carefully. Go into Father’s chest and dispense a weapon to every woman on this land who doesn’t have one. If the men in their houses are strong enough to lift a hand, arm them as well.”

“What are you doing?” Maeve said. “Didn’t you hear her? They intended us no harm. Our gods have not forsaken us.”

Orla rose. “Those warriors were testing to see if our men would come when we cried out. And they didn’t, because they’re dead and dying. They spared us because we’re worth more alive to them than we are dead, and they just confirmed we’re too few and too weak to defend this land. They’ll be back in greater numbers.”

“But our gods…” Maeve protested. “Biddy said—”

“Don’t mention that old witch to me—I don’t trust her. We need Acacius so we can get gold to pay for real defense. There are slightly more civilized tribes on the mainland…. We may be able to hire their men until we figure out a better situation. Acacius and his crew will take up arms while they’re here. Maybe we can get them to stay until we secure other means.”

“We don’t need them,” Maeve snarled, her white teeth glowing against her mud-caked lips. “I’ll drive this spear through any man. We’re capable enough.”

“Just because you can wield a spear and make yourself look like something that crawled from the bog doesn’t mean you can take down

dozens, if not hundreds, of warriors from this island," Orla said. "I'm a hunter, not a killer. And the rest of these women can barely stomach skinning a pelt. We need gold to pay for real warriors. Experienced warriors."

"It always comes down to that damned Grecian and his boat with you."

"That Grecian and his boat have been the answers to many a generations' prayers here. And he'll be the answer to ours now."

"Go!" Orla shoved Alina in the direction of their home. "Arm the women. We're going to the port."

CHAPTER 2
KILL THY NEIGHBOR

The soil under their feet turned sandy as reeds replaced the grass. The breeze morphed into a chilled and biting wind that blew in from the ocean waters, and the sounds of gulls finally drowned out the dreadful cawing of those damned crows. Briny mist wet Orla's face, and made the smell of rotting seaweed and mollusks feel like it was sticking to her. There hadn't been manpower to keep the shores clean for quite some time now.

Orla pulled her wolfskin higher and covered her nose with it. Inside her pocket, she fingered through the little wooden gods that Acacius gave her. She found the one who held both sword and spear, the one Acacius most often spoke of. Ares was the Grecian god of war, and had led Hella to many victories. That the Grecian gods answered prayers and prospered their people was evident by Acacius, all the while her own gods sat back and let chaos reign. Perhaps the gods who favored Acacius would favor her too. She whispered a prayer to Ares and hoped for the best.

Women waited around the pier with beasts of burden ready to load with goods. The more stoutly gals pulled giant wheel-carts, and their children played with the rotting sea life that washed up on the shore.

The incoming ship was still a silhouette, though it was much closer than the horizon now. Orla bent over the shoreline and splashed her face with the freezing water, any trace of exhaustion shocked away in the icy assault. She scrubbed off as much of the mud and warpaint as she could—

Acacius hadn’t seen her like this, and it was certainly no look to land a husband. So long as she had to stay ready for battle, she basically was just a notch above livestock.

Still, Acacius appreciated her stronger nature. How often did he marvel at her strength when she helped him tie down sails? Or at her skills with a blade when they sparred? If she didn’t know better, she’d think he loved her because of her strength, not in spite of it.

She stepped on to the gray pier and walked to the edge, the wooden planks stressed and creaking as the tide rolled in below them. Thoughts of his smooth olive skin and thick, black hair warmed her cheeks under the biting ocean wind. So different than the ruddy, brutish men of her own lands. Would he bring her a new god this time?

She reveled in those precious moments of stomach-knotting anticipation and fixed her gaze on the ship as it grew larger, the sky blazing red and pink as the sun began its final descent. Women around the pier lit torches, their orange glow dotting her periphery. But then Orla froze.

Torches?

“Maeve?” Orla cocked her head and called out to her sister. “Didn’t Alina say the ship crossed the horizon this morning?” It should’ve docked hours ago.

Before Maeve could answer, Silhouettes of men gathered at the front of the ship—too many to count. Fur outlined some of their shoulders, and they all held things in their hands. A knot twisted in Orla’s stomach as rope flew forward and hooked on to the pier. She blinked, focusing intently on the shapes that stretched from the hands of the men. Sharp, deadly shapes. Her eyes went wide.

“RUN!” She spun and took off down the pier toward the settlement, grabbing Maeve and dragging her behind. “We’re under attack!”

The roaring moan of a battle horn filled the air, followed by the familiar *gairm sluaigh* of a neighboring tribe, their battle cry a rough staccato of harsh, deep voices. Heavy thumps of men’s feet hit the pier and got closer, their gairm sluaigh growing louder and more menacing with each step. Children screamed and women scrambled frantically as the sisters cut through the beach.

“We have to fight!” Maeve tried to run back, but Orla yanked her so hard she stumbled.

“We can’t!” Orla said, “there’s too many. We have to protect Mother and Alina!” Maeve’s face sank at their mention— her temper always did precede her judgement.

The sisters raced through the reeds and then the brush that separated their settlement from the beach. Arrows whizzed by and lodged into trees as they sprinted forward, the air now filled with the desperate screams of their clanswomen.

Desperate screams… and something else.

Gairm sluaighs, too many to count now, wailed from every angle. “It’s an ambush!” Orla yelled, and leapt over the short stone wall at the edge of the settlement while enemies poured in from both the north and south, and were about to swarm in at their heel from the eastern port. Women were being dragged off in every direction, hauled by beastlike men, half naked in their warpaint and animal skins.

Orla yanked two large, iron blades from their sheaths at her calves and slashed at any man that came near as they raced through the field, leaping over the bodies of brave young women who had fallen in defense of their clan. Maeve hollered their own gairm sluaigh as she rammed her spear like a wild banshee, and a few female voices cried it back in response. Some of their fighters still lived—maybe the Grecian god of war had heard her. Still, all around young women were dragged off into dancing, fiery shadows, and elder women were dispatched quickly and without mercy.

“Barbarians!” Orla cried out the word that Acacius used so frequently. He was right—these damned tribes couldn’t unite to make anything better, but they’d unite to raid and rape and take what wasn’t theirs. She raged, and the crows cawed back mockingly. If she was to survive this, she’d take anyone left and find her way to the Grecian lands—to Hella—where women grew gardens in their homes and raised their children in safety.

They approached their house, and the front door had already been bashed in. Orla put a finger to her lips as they slipped inside. Three beastly men loomed over Alina and their mother, taunting them. Mother snarled in front of Alina, like a wild cat protecting her cub. Orla gingerly grabbed her bow from beside the hearth and nocked an arrow. She drew and loosed, but the attacker whipped around just in time to dodge her shot. He lunged and she spun, tumbling with grace to land in front of her mother.

He pulled an ax from his belt and cocked it back, but a spearhead appeared through the front of his throat. Maeve yanked the spear back and he tumbled with a thud. Orla pulled out her blades and swung wildly at another man, all the while praying to Ares for strength. She slashed and ripped with everything she had. The man was solid as an oak, but she was fast as a rabbit, nipping and stabbing without cease. Finally, she slashed the backs of his knees and he went down.

She turned to Maeve who'd been disarmed and was on the floor, mounted by the last gruesome man. Orla sliced both sides of his throat from behind, and twin waterfalls of blood spewed as he clawed his neck, tumbling over.

They rushed to their mother and sister, falling to their knees to make sure the little one was alright. Alina shook like an earthquake, her skin ghost white with terror. Then she pointed a shaking finger behind Orla, and her green eyes went wide. Orla spun. The man who's knees Orla had cut was somehow standing behind their mother. He stretched his arm back, the orange light from the fire outside gleaming at the tip of his blade. Before Orla could get halfway to her feet, the blade swiped clean through her mother's neck.

Orla listened to a deafening scream for several seconds before she realized it was her own. The smell of burning wood and straw mingled with that of blood as Orla's soul jerked and withered inside her. The murderer then jolted abruptly forward and his eyes bulged, the whites bright against his black, monstrous war paint. Blood bubbled from his mouth and he keeled over. Behind him stood the haggard woman, Biddy Early.

She yanked a blood-soaked sword from his torso. "We've got to go," Biddy said. "I've been around a long, long time, and I tell you, this is not a fight you can win. The others are waiting outside."

Orla couldn't move. Biddy slapped her and she snapped from the stupor.

"Grab Alina!" Maeve said, already hoisting their little sister up from under one shoulder, and Orla did the same. They followed Biddy through the back door where over a dozen other young, fighting women of their clan waited.

"We can hide in the woods," Duna said. "We know these lands better than the vomit hunting us." Duna was the daughter of Orla's great uncle, at

least twenty years Orla's senior, but plenty fast and brutally strong.

"No," Biddy said. "We must take refuge at the gate."

"The gate?" Orla asked, the battle cries of their enemies getting closer. "We have no gates here."

"The gate of the goddess," Biddy spit back, like she was offended Orla didn't know what she was talking about. "The divine well that sits on your land, foolish girl."

Orla gritted her teeth. Odd timing for the hag to choose a harsh tone, moments after she'd watched her own mother's head lopped off.

"Peace," Maeve put her hand on Orla's shoulder and squeezed. "Biddy is a druidess. She has wisdom."

"Fine," Orla spit a mouthful of blood on the floor. "We'll go to the divine well. At least we'll have fresh water there." She clutched the little spear god in her pocket. The god who achieved peace through war—peace through strength. She'd get to the Grecian lands, and take her family with her—eventually. But if they were ever going to get there, first they had to get to that well.

CHAPTER 3
THE WELL

The women took cover in the brush and raced west. Alina had been completely catatonic, unable to respond to anything. Biddy would've fallen behind had they not been slowed by their sister, and Maeve helping the old woman. Whether she did it out of pity or respect, Orla didn't know. But she herself couldn't dredge up any feeling for the stranger who claimed herself kin. Maybe she just associated the hag with misery, given the dark turn their lives had taken after her arrival.

Acacius had said that his water god blessed his journeys east, but he also stayed vigilant for omens. Had he recognized the cacophony of crows near their shores as such? And abandoned ship for it? These thoughts haunted her as she dragged Alina through the brush and weeds. So much loss in a single hour. So much loss in a single year.

They rounded the north-western corner of their lands and dropped to their bellies, crawling south to avoid being seen. They entered the underground well and quickly blocked the entrance behind them. Several women tried to haul a boulder from the back of the cave, but it was too heavy to even budge, so they settled for a pile of smaller stones instead. Light still reflected dimly from the bottom of the well, though how it did so, Orla didn't know. It must've been coming from a source somewhere, moonlight that sunk to the bottom of the lake and bounced off polished rocks.

Biddy pushed the hood of her cloak down and looked around at the cavern walls, alive with the reflection of dancing water. She smiled, revealing a mouth full of rot and missing teeth. Orla grimaced. “Remove your shoes,” the hag said with too much authority. “You stand on hallowed grounds.”

The old woman’s flattery and bottom kissing had vanished like a thin vapor. The women obeyed her—all but Orla and Alina, who was still too stupefied to acknowledge anything.

“This is no doorway to the goddess Brigid,” Orla said. “It’s just a well.”

“Stupid girl,” Biddy spat. “This is no doorway to Brigid. It’s a gate to *the Morrigan*. She shines her light so we may see… gives us refuge to gather plans.”

Orla rolled her eyes. “I’m not removing my shoes.”

Biddy came closer, so close that her stinking breath oozed in Orla’s face. Her crooked nose and pointy cheeks looked like jagged ice in the soft blue light, and the film over her eyes was distant and dead. “I suppose such wickedness should be expected from the daughter of a chieftain who welcomed foreign gods to our lands.”

Orla flexed her jaw. “My father welcomed good men who made our lives better. Good men who worship good gods.” Orla squeezed Ares in her palm and drew strength from him.

Biddy sniffed at the air like a predator. “I can smell the profanity on you like dung.”

Galloping hoofs rolled across the knoll above them, shaking loose some dirt, and everyone froze.

“More are coming,” Maeve hissed after a moment. “We have to get far away from here.”

“And go where?” Duna hissed back. “Every tribe on the island will be hunting us.”

“We need to get to the ship,” Orla said. “Not even a god could fight this whole island.”

“A ship we can’t sail?” Maeve laughed.

“I can,” Orla said. “Or at least we can. I’ve sailed some with Acacius.”

“You’ve sailed in circles so a foreign man could impress his way into your trousers,” Maeve said. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I know enough,” Orla bit back. “The rest we can figure out. There’ll be provisions onboard that they were going to trade. That and anything left for the crew will sustain us.”

“She’s got a point,” Duna said. “Those idiots out there will be too busy raping corpses and getting drunk to realize the importance of the cargo on board.”

“They know the importance,” Orla said. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t be here. We shouldn’t underestimate them. But agreed that unloading that ship likely isn’t their priority tonight.”

“Because they’re too busy hunting us down,” Maeve said.

“I can get us to the ship,” Biddy interrupted. “But there will be a price for that victory.”

Orla narrowed her eyes. “Even if you could get us to that ship, you should want to save us as much as we want to save ourselves if you’re truly kin.”

“It’s not my price.” Biddy pulled the hood of her dark cloak over her head. “But I know one who could endow you with enough power to drench this shore in the blood of your enemies.” She reached toward the ceiling and curled her fingers, as if beckoning something to come. A root from the oak above unfurled and stretched downward, winding around her arm and caressing it. Orla’s eyes widened.

“I told you,” Maeve said, smiling like an idiot. “She’s a real druidess. Rich in wisdom and power.”

The root snapped from its source and continued up her arm, then around her collar. It morphed into a snake as it made its way down her other arm, finally stopping when it’s neck was in her hand. She crushed it, and the snake turned to a wooden staff. She thumped the ground with it, and everyone gasped.

“What is your answer?” Biddy croaked from underneath the hood. “Shall I summon power, or does this cavern become our grave?”

“Summon the power,” Maeve commanded. “No matter the cos—”

“Shut your mouth,” Orla snapped, and locked the old druidess in her gaze. “What is this cost you speak of?”

“A pittance of a debt compared to what you need. You will be required to offer the goddess your strongest fruit at harvest time, and to teach your daughters to do the same. Nothing more.”

“Is that the only tribute?” Orla asked. “Strongest fruit at the harvest?”

“My goddess is noble and fair as she is strong,” Biddy said. “Your tributes must continue as long as your people do, but they will be no bigger than a bundle. No great loss to the daughters of this clan.”

Maeve hopped on that boulder they couldn’t budge like a feral, mud-covered wolf, and raised her spear. “Who’s in favor of summoning a power that will soak these shores in the blood of our enemies?” Everyone’s hand went up—save for Alina, who rocked piteously on the floor—and a heaviness fell over Orla. She gripped the little Grecian war god in her palm, and prayed silently. She’d keep this oath for her clan, but she’d never give true loyalty to the gods who allowed all this to befall them.

Biddy thumped her staff again, and tiny vines grew from the tip into the form of a chalice. “Cut your right palm and bleed into this cup. This is the cup of our goddess, and its contents will be legal and binding.”

“Not Alina,” Orla demanded. “She’s consented to nothing.”

Biddy looked down at the young waif, rocking and wide-eyed in her sudden madness. The rest of them pulled out blades and sliced their palms.

“She’s broken anyway,” Biddy said. “Our goddess has no use of her.”

Orla sighed and reluctantly sliced her palm. Hopefully this was the last she’d hear about their gods for a long while. They all bled into the cup.

Biddy stood before the well, her bony, sagging face peeking from the hood. She muttered something in an ancient tongue, and poured the blood into the water. It quickly clouded red.

At once, fish flooded in. Ugly, black fish that swirled in circles under the water. They filled it, writhing and wiggling atop one another until they emerged into the air, their scales turning to feathers and their fins morphing to wings.

Orla’s heart dropped. A deafening symphony of flapping wings and shrill caws filled the cavern as black crows rushed into a tight, towering circle. They melted into the form of a woman. A tall, giantess who wore a long, feathered coat on her muscular, hourglass form. For hair, she had a thick spray of ebony feathers, and the lips of her harsh, sharp face were painted blood red. At least Orla hoped it was paint.

Biddy Early fell prostrate, and the Morrigan stood there, silent. Her glowing green eyes roamed the cavern with a cold, aloof grace as she regarded the women. Biddy slowly raised her head from the ground, and looked at the deity. The Morrigan nodded, then exploded into a murder of crows. Orla covered her face as the crows struck at her. Sharp beaks

pecked and ripped at her flesh, and the screams of the women filled the cave. Then, all at once, the crows joined into a swirl and dove back into the well.

Orla heaved, barely catching her breath. She rubbed at her bare skin to try and stop the bleeding, but nothing was wet. She examined her hands— no blood. She looked to the others, who also examined their bodies in shock.

“What have you done!” Orla yelled at Biddy, who used the staff to slowly haul herself up. “She tried to kill us!”

“Had the Morrigan tried to kill you,” Biddy said, “you’d be dead. She wasn’t killing you. She was pruning your weakness and fear. There is only strength now.”

Orla knitted her brow, but before she could process what Biddy said, she spied something in the water from the corner of her eye.

“Alina!” She lunged and grabbed her sister, who floated face down. Maeve was instantly at her side and they lifted the girl out. Alina was lighter than Orla remembered. Like lifting a dog, or a fox.

Orla knelt her over and squeezed her stomach. Water came rushing from her nose and mouth.

“You’ll crush her!” Maeve said, shoving Orla to the side. Orla went flying into the big boulder, which budged from the force of her hitting it. She shook it off and crawled back to her sisters.

“Breathe!” Maeve screamed as the little girl lay there, red hair slicked to her face and white as a ghost. Orla lifted her sister to a sitting position, but very gently this time. She patted her back softly, and the little girl jerked forward, more water spewing from her mouth. She gasped a deep breath.

“Thank the gods,” Orla exhaled. Alina coughed, her eyes still squeezed shut. When the coughing calmed, she went still and opened them.

Orla covered her mouth to stifle the scream. Alina’s eyes were fully white. Gone were her green emeralds, replaced with pale marbles of death.

“What’s wrong with her!?” Maeve rasped.

“She’s in the Between,” Biddy said calmly. “Not all of her— just some of her. Half drowned in the waters of a present and powerful goddess. She’s either drunk of the Morrigan’s fury, or drunk of her fate. You’d better hope it’s the latter.”

CHAPTER 4
STRONG HANDS

Orla held her breath as Alina stood up, her hair and dress soaked and clinging to her. She fixed her white eyes on the stairs leading to the cavern's mouth, and pointed. The muffled voices of men and scraping rocks crept down to the women.

"Draw your weapons." Orla's heart began to race. "They've found us."

"Their leader will die under the weight of a great stone," Alina droned in a strange voice. "The rest will fall by blade and bow."

"There were hundreds of them," one of the women croaked. "We're all going to die."

"Then we'll die fighting." Orla reached for her blade— but paused, noticing her hand. She stretched it out, then curled it into a fist. It was bigger—stronger than she remembered. Slowly, she moved her gaze to the women around the cave. How had she not noticed? They were rippled in taught muscle—jaws now fully square and strong and wide. Their shadows, once reaching halfway up the wall, now reached to the top.

"Do as she says," Orla said and rushed to the boulder. She gripped it on both sides and pushed hard. It actually moved. She turned her gaze to the cave's mouth. "Help me!"

Maeve and Duna gripped the boulder alongside her, and it lifted with ease. The voices by the mouth of the cave got louder, and the women all gathered behind them with their weapons drawn.

Orla looked at her sister and Duna, and they nodded to one another. She yelped the high-pitched gairm sluaigh of their clan, and the women echoed the battle cry in response. The three of them took off with the boulder up the stairs, and burst through the pile of rocks. Half a dozen men fell as they poured through, and three more were crushed flat when they launched the boulder at a shocked huddle of men.

They ran through the fiery field, bellowing their battle cry. Alina and Biddy trailed in their wake, stepping over the slaughtered corpses of their enemies. Orla was almost giddy as she leapt over towering shrubs in a single bound, and crushed the necks of burly warriors like dried winter twigs. Her sight was that of an eagle now, and her arrows could pierce an enemy's eye socket from a hundred yards away.

They darted through the woods, killing any cocky stragglers who thought the battle was over. It had crossed her mind to stay and reclaim their home, but capable as they were, at only a dozen or so strong, their numbers were still too few to fight off the whole island forever. Besides—if she was to offer any kind of life to what was growing in her stomach, and whatever was left of Alina—they needed new land. New culture. Grief clawed at her throat at the thought of Acacius, and what they must've done to him when they hijacked his ship. She gulped it down.

They bolted through the settlement, slashing and clawing through the enemy clans gathered around their burning homes. Duna was right—they were already drunk and raping the corpses, so the majority who were still in the settlement were caught off guard. Maeve was a spectacle, fueled by rage and revenge, she cut through the muscled men like a ravenous plague.

The smell of rotting fish hit her as they moved past the settlement and closer to the port. Lit torches that were dropped earlier still burned on the ground. She picked one up and motioned her tribe to follow.

She slowed. If they rushed the approach, any enemy on or near that ship could torch it. If she didn't move them from this island now, in the heat of rage and battle, they might not want to leave. And she may never find another ship.

Something moved in the reeds and she pivoted, pointing the light at it. A thin silhouette of a man held up his hands, repeating a word that she didn't understand. He stepped into the light, eyes wide and terrified. His dark skin bore no war paint, and his tunic was made of soaked and tattered fabric. She recognized him.

“Farzad?” She rushed toward, and he stepped farther into the light. Maeve lunged for him but Orla yanked her back.

“Peace!” she said. “This is a member of Acacius’ crew.”

Farzad let out a flurry of words that made no sense to her. She’d learned some Grecian words from Acacius, but Farzad spoke neither Grecian nor her language. Farzad was from a place they called Persia, as were several of the crew who sailed for Acacius— who spoke too many tongues to count. Farzad kept repeating the same three-syllable word as he pointed at them, but Orla didn’t understand.

He motioned them to follow him, and lead them across the beach and to the ship, which bobbed lazily under the moonlight. The women cleared the ship of any threats that lingered on board, with several bodies splashing into the water.

Farzad leaned over the edge and pointed into the black waters of the ocean. In the thin slice of moonlight, something floated. Orla untethered the ship from the dock and Farzad began working the sails. She directed the women as Acacius would direct his crew the best she could remember. Farzad took care of the important things, directing the women with his body rather than words. Clumsily, they followed, still getting used to the force of their new strength.

They took to the waters, and navigated to the driftwood that Orla now saw had several men clinging to it. She dared not let herself hope that Acacius survived, lest she be too crushed by the grief that would inevitably follow.

The air was frigid by now, and turned her breath to icy steam. Three men clung to the bobbing raft, while one lay across it, lifeless and covered in blood. She steeled herself.

Maeve and Duna tossed ropes to the men who clung, and lifted them to safety while Orla secured a rope and lowered herself into the water. A million icy blades stabbed through her skin as she submerged, forcing herself forward against the cold. She swam, the icy water battling for her very breath. She reached the raft and turned upright the head of the man who lay there.

A shallow breath caught in her throat.

Acacius.

She put her ear against his mouth and felt just a whisp of warm air. She closed her eyes and thanked his gods. She dragged the raft behind her as

she swam back to the ship. Maeve and Duna threw her a rope, and hauled them up.

Once onboard, they carried Acacius to the cargo area where Farzad emptied a crate of lavish carpets and fur. She stripped off his clothes, and his strong, muscular body was limp and covered in small, bloody wounds. She stripped her own wet clothes off and lay against him. It wouldn't be the first time their naked bodies pressed together to find warmth. She wrapped them in the carpets and fur, while Duna held a torch nearby.

She buried her face in his chest and prayed—oh how she prayed—to his gods. That it took a hag like Biddy Early to call the goddess to their aid, rather than the fervent prayers and desperate pleas of a good and loyal people spoke volumes. She trusted the Morrigan even less than she trusted Biddy Early.

Orla rubbed her womb and wondered if whatever grew in there would make it through another two moon cycles. Most didn't, so she wouldn't let herself grow attached just yet. She couldn't handle another loss. But if it did—if it did—and if Acacius lived, maybe there was the slightest sliver of a hope that she could grow herbs from a garden in the center of her home and prepare a stew for her husband and child one day in the peace and safety of civilization.

But there was one hope that had already come to pass: those vicious crows had stayed ashore.

CHAPTER 5
HELLA

Acacius gradually got better as the days went by, even though he remained unconscious. Orla stayed in the cargo area and kept watch over him, keeping him warm and lifting his head to make him drink water—some of which he'd actually swallow before choking. She kept his beard and hair neatly trimmed, lest he wake up with that barbarian look he so despised. There were times he stirred, only to fall back asleep after murmuring curses in his native tongue.

Orla refreshed the wound dressings that nearly covered all his skin. He was covered in hundreds, if not a thousand deep gashes. Whatever happened to him didn't happen to the rest of them. Though it was impossible to get the story with the language barrier between them and the crew.

Regardless of that barrier, the women got on exceptionally well with the Persians. There was much to be said for the common ground between an undomesticated woman and a sailor. The word that Farzad had been repeating when Orla first found him had become an endearing nickname that the Persians used for the women aboard. Though what it meant, Orla had no idea. Hopefully—for the crew's sake—it wouldn't be too insulting.

"Orla?" Duna stepped into the cargo area. She almost looked civilized with the warpaint and mud now completely cleaned from her face and body. Her thick, knotted locks had also been mostly brushed out, due to her raiding of the cargo hold and finding some ivory hair-combs.

“How’s Alina?” Orla asked.

“Same,” Duna said. “Maeve is keeping watch of her. She simply stares into nothing, uttering words that shortly come to pass. We think she may be divine now.”

“She’s not divine,” Orla said. “She’s just polluted by that insidious goddess. Make sure that old witch stays away from her, and away from this cargo hold.”

“She gives me the creeps too,” Duna said. “But I came in to tell you that we’ve just passed through a narrow crossing into strange, new waters. Blue waters, unlike our own. No doubt this is a different sea.”

Acacius stirred, and they hushed, fixing their eyes on him. “He does this every now and then,” Orla said. “But he never—”

Acacius opened his brown eyes, the deep olive color suddenly returning to his skin. Orla and Duna exchanged a glance, then stumbled to pour a cup of water from the pitcher. He shot up to a sitting position, his eyes darting around. He fixed them on Orla, and the taught muscles in his shoulders relaxed.

She cupped his cheek, his skin now warm to the touch, and caressed his brow. He smiled.

“Where are we?” he said in Orla’s native tongue. “Where’s my crew?”

“We’re on your ship.” Orla shot a concerned look to Duna. She couldn’t unload the full situation on him just yet. “Farzad is above, along with some others.”

“What sea do we sail now?”

“We’re passing a narrow straight from dark waters to light,” Duna chimed in.

Acacius threw his head back and laughed. “The Pillars of Heracles… Thank you, Poseidon, I won’t forget this.”

“There was an attack at our shores,” Orla said cautiously. “A plague killed our men, and the other tribes attacked us. We found refuge on your ship.”

He looked down at his body, half covered in wound dressing and the rest in warm fur. He laughed under his breath.

“Is something funny?” Orla asked.

“Not funny at all, my love. I knew the risks, but I came to see you regardless. And I’d do it again.”

“Can you remember anything?” she asked.

He nodded. “As we approached the shallow and came near shore, a dark cloud formed above the ship, followed by a rolling fog. The cloud broke into a thousand pieces. Birds—wretched, screaming birds. More than a dozen rafts appeared from the fog, littered with the worst of the filthy, barbarian men. They hooked lines to our ship as the birds attacked me. They forced me overboard and tried to kill me. It was Farzad and the Persians of my crew who jumped in after me. After that, I don’t remember.”

Orla shot Duna a glance. No coincidence the crows were involved. This whole deal with the Morrigan reeked to the last of the heavens. Footsteps padded down the steps and Farzad appeared, with his crew mates in tow. Acacius stood up, wrapping the fur blanket around his waist and embracing all of them. They relayed something to him in their native tongue, and his face fell solemn. He turned back to Orla.

“The barbarians of your island murdered the rest of my crew—Grecians go down with their ship. The Persians survived because their loyalty was to their captain, not the vessel. But those dead men were like warriors who daily took on Poseidon himself…” His gaze met the floor. “And I loved them for that. These crimes won’t go unpunished.”

Orla didn’t have the heart to tell him he’d probably have to wage war with a goddess. Let him have his grief and delusions of revenge. Hopefully they were far enough from the Morrigan, and under the protection of the Grecian gods, not to worry about offending her.

They arrived at the shores of a remote place, no cities in sight. The boat docked right at the shoreline, which was crystal clear and beautiful. They climbed down into warm, inviting waters—nothing like the freezing, opaque waters of their own island. The women looked around with awe. Gone were the rotting mollusks and stinking seaweed. It was almost as if the beach cleaned itself—or perhaps this Poseidon that Acacius was so fond of, did a better job of keeping his domain here.

“We’re taking you to a sanctuary where you can settle in,” Acacius said. “An ancient temple that’s not been used for centuries.” They lead the women through the beach and into a wooded area that had pathways paved in stone. Orla and the women exchanged glances. What kind of merciful god inspired the paving of pathways through forests?

“Thus far, even your forest is comfortable,” Orla said, grateful not to be walking her sea-legs through mud and rocks. She felt at the wooden

figurines still stowed safely in her pocket. “Tell me… this empty temple you take us to, what became of its god?”

Acacius smiled and glanced at her, his deep tan and sun-kissed black hair making his brown eyes look almost orange. “It’s god was so successful in his duties, that a bigger, better temple was built for him in a city he conquered. You see, a god’s jurisdiction depends on the language spoken in the land. In the most ancient of days, all men were united with one language. But they grew too powerful, so their language was scattered and gods were assigned to watch over them. Jurisdictions were created. A god who can conquer land can expand a people’s language and unite them. That is a very powerful god.”

“Powerful as Poseidon?”

He chuckled. “Poseidon’s smart. He chose a domain with no language, so he can rule it all. Both gods and men are wise to stay in his good graces.”

They came to a clearing in the forest where a white, stone structure sat. Columns lined its rectangular perimeter, and despite the fact that it was overgrown with foliage, it was the most beautiful thing Orla’d ever seen. It was so tall and detailed and beautiful. A far cry from the straw-hatched roofs and stone huts of their settlement back home.

“We’ll unload the cargo from the ship and leave it here,” Acacius said. “As far as anyone knows, it’s lost at sea. The soil is good here, and much food grows wild. Your women are the most impressive I’ve ever seen in the world, so you’ll fare well.”

“Wait…” Orla gripped his arm. “You’re not staying with us?”

“I’ll return, I promise,” Acacius said. “But I cannot stay now. I have to tend to other duties. Important duties.”

She felt at her womb and considered momentarily telling him that it had now been four moon cycles since she’d bled, but pride pushed back the thought. She wouldn’t beg a man to stay. Not for her, and not for a child that she didn’t even know would make it full term. “I understand,” she said, steeling herself.

“That’s what I love about you, Orla. You’re not weak. You never were.” He kissed her forehead and turned back toward the ship.

“Acacius wait…”

He turned around, a chiselled picture of beauty in this exotic land.

“Before I forget to ask… what is that word that the Persians keep calling us?”

“Ha-mazon,” he laughed. “It’s really quite endearing that they show you such respect. You should feel honored.”

She cocked her head and tried to repeat the Persian word, but the inflection of her own native tongue made it sound ridiculous. He repeated it, this time slowly, annunciating each phonetic.

“Aah-mah-zon.”

“Amazon?” she mimicked. “Amazon.”

“That’s right,” he nodded. “It’s Persian, for warrior.”

CHAPTER 6

THE AMAZONS

SIXTEEN MONTHS LATER

"Maeve?" Orla stepped into the garden where her sister plucked handfuls of tomatoes with only one hand. "I can take him if you want. He can get burdensome after a while."

Maeve paused to shoot Orla a disapproving glance. "Burdensome?" She lifted the baby, who was just over eleven months old now, from her hip and set him on his feet where he wobbled. He plopped one foot in front of himself, then the other. "See," she smirked. "He's perfectly capable and helpful. Just like his Auntie Maeve."

Orla chuckled to herself. Maeve was a sight these days. She'd finally stopped covering herself in mud and warpaint so that you could see her delicate freckles, and even grew out those knotty, red locks. Draped in beige linen like she was today, you'd scarcely believe she could gut you with one hand while snapping your neck with the other.

"Your basket overflows," Orla said. "Seems the Grecian gods favor you."

Maeve petted the baby's head while he plucked a tomato and squished it. "Favor *us*," she corrected. "Rain from Grecian skies and sweat from Amazon brows water these gardens."

The name had become something of a point of pride, something to separate who they were from who they had become. They were still a clan, just different. “But still,” Orla said, “I’ve seen the new figurines by your bed too.”

“It’s not that I’m forgetting our gods, or our people…” Maeve shrugged. “But a few of us have found admiration for the goddess here they call Artemis. We’ve been burning incense to her by the oak tree behind the temple. The more we pray and burn, the lusher the gardens grow. Maybe someday we’ll dedicate this old temple to her.”

“Acacius never did tell me who this temple belonged to.”

Maeve grimaced at the mention of him. “Any word from your disappearing lover? Is he aware that his son will be old enough to ask about his father soon?”

Her words stung. “Farzad said Acacius will try and be here for the harvest festival.”

“Tonight?” Maeve rolled her eyes and went back to picking tomatoes. “By the gods, Orla. You haven’t even given your son a name…. Don’t you think it’s time you move on? He doesn’t care—”

“He doesn’t know.”

Maeve raised her eyebrows. “Wow,” she said, placing the full basket aside and picking up a new one. “How can you wait until Acacius chooses a name for the boy when he doesn’t even know he exists?”

“I don’t want him to come back because of duty. We can raise him. If anyone can make a man of the child…” Orla looked her sister up and down. “… it’s definitely you.”

Maeve threw a tomato at her and Orla ducked. “I want him to come back because he loves me,” she said, still laughing at her own joke. “Not because of duty to his son.”

“Did you hear that?” Maeve leaned over to her nephew and cooed. “Your mother is denying you a father and a name, because she’s a big, selfish turd.”

“Thanks,” Orla said. “I think I’ll go kill something now.”

“Good,” Maeve said. “We need venison at the harvest feast. I’m sick of fish and olives…. These Grecians need more red meat in their diet.”

THE WOMEN DID A SURPRISINGLY good job at setting up the first festival in their new home. The clay ovens they built at the perimeter of the whitewashed temple were sizzling with fresh venison and rabbit, smoke pouring out as the savory smell of the meat mixed with fresh olive oil and spices. Wooden tables built by the women were added to the main sanctuary, where bowls of colorful fruit and jugs of wine sat waiting for the celebration.

Orla finished butchering the last leg of the deer she killed and brought it to the preparation table, where Duna tenderized the flesh with a mallet.

"Take it easy on that doe." Orla raised her eyebrows. "What'd she ever do to you?"

Duna put down the mallet. "I've tried to show Biddy our offerings for the Morrigan at least three times, and all three times she dismissed them. I've got a bad feeling. And now she's put on that same robe she wore at the well that night."

"Druids wear robes," Orla said, popping a grape in her mouth and trying not to ruin the impending celebration with worry. "We'll give the Morrigan her due and move on."

"Gods help us if that terrifying thing shows up," Duna sighed.

Orla didn't have space in her mind for thoughts of the Morrigan and her son in the same room, so she changed the subject. "How's my sister?"

"I'm assuming you mean Alina," Duna said, not bothering to look up from her pounding. "I know it's hard, but you should try to spend more time with her. For your own sake, so you don't feel so guilty about it."

Orla ignored the advice and forced a smile. "Will she be joining the celebration?"

"Ask her yourself…." Duna motioned toward the west end of the temple, where a small figure stood alone in the doorway, draped head to toe in fine, blue silk. Sunlight outlined her like a halo, casting a long shadow as it sparkled from her gold embroidery.

"Who put those clothes on her?" Orla asked, shocked to see Alina out amongst the living, much less dressed like that. Most days the women barely got her to eat.

"She put them on herself," Duna said. "She's been standing there for hours."

Orla regarded her sister for several moments. "It's as if she's waiting for someone."

“Or something.” Duna shot a concerned glance, but Orla ignored it. Seeing a god in the flesh was something everyone wanted far behind them.

Orla approached Alina and attempted to speak with her, but the girl just stared blankly into the forest from the temple door. She’d been leaving the care of her little sister to Maeve and the others, using her son as a convenient excuse. In reality, Alina was too painful to be around. In the rare instances she did speak, she only prophesied. Nothing spectacular, just mundane predictions about life around the temple. But they always came to pass. Orla feared the day her prophesy would take a more serious tone.

She gave up and turned away, but then Alina gripped her by the shoulder. Orla froze.

“Your child will receive a name before the end of the night,” Alina droned, her ghost-white eyes staring at nothing. “But his name, you shall not grant.”

Terror gripped Orla’s mind, but then she did the math of Alina’s prophecy, and a smile broke out on her lips. “Acacius is coming then!” She hugged her sister. “Thank you!”

CHAPTER 7
LOVE, WAR AND ORIGINS

The top of the sun winked out just beyond the woods at the sea's horizon, and stars began to populate the darkening sky. Torches flared to life in and out of the temple, marking the advent of their celebration. A bulbous, tawny moon rose above the treeline until it settled in the heart of the sky— the harvest moon.

Voices filled the temples sanctuary as the rest of the clan filed in. Wine flowed in rivers as the women ate and drank and sang songs from their homeland. Orla perused the lot of them as her son sat nearby playing with the bright-colored rocks Maeve had painted for him. It was hard to believe these were the same women, who, barely more than a year ago, were covered in warpaint and fur, ready to plow a field or impale any man. Now deadlier than ever, they instead danced and sang in white linen robes. They could've passed for real Grecians had it not been for their freckled skin and reddish hair. *Amazons,* she thought. Exotic and musical to the ear, yet deadly in its meaning.

The harvest offering for the Morrigan had been gathered by the altar. Jugs of wine and grain, along with vegetation were sacrificed. The wild boar that Orla had killed with her bare hands earlier roasted over embers to serve as the meat offering. Incense burned and flowers were scattered, in hopes that the Morrigan might be satisfied from afar, and call their debt paid. Orla kept one eye fixed at the mouth of the sanctuary, and one eye on the alter. The only visitor she wanted to see this night was Acacius.

Biddy Early appeared before the altar and the Amazons fell silent, turning their attention to the old woman. She still wore those same dark robes that Duna had described—the ones from the last night in the well. She thumped her staff, and a thin sheen of sweat broke out on Orla's brow. Biddy regarded their offerings with a sour expression, her face upturned and smug. The rest of the women looked around to one another, their faces rife with concern.

She kicked over a jug of wine and it shattered, splashing across the floor. Everyone gasped.

"Foolish women," she spit, her haggard expression made that much worse by the torchlight. "Your fathers and mothers burned incense at the altar too, and look where that got them. It's bad enough that your spirits reek with the stench of other gods… but you add insult to injury with your vinegar and vegetables."

No one replied. They might have had the power to leap over trees, but none tempted fate by taunting a true god they had seen with their own eyes.

"You bled into the chalice and made a contract, legal and binding," Biddy said. "It's not the strongest fruit of the *land* the goddess wants." The torches around the sanctuary went dim, and the muffled sound of flapping wings leaked in from outside.

"It's the strongest fruit of your *wombs* that pleases our goddess!"

Orla's stomach lurched as her eyes darted around, looking for her son. She stumbled forward in the dark and searched frantically, groping and bumping into things. The flapping grew louder until Orla could hear the whoosh of birds swooping into the temple.

"So long as your blood roams this earth," Biddy's voice rose above the crows. "Any sons bred by the Amazons will be tribute to the Morrigan! Those are the covenant terms, fair and binding."

A baby's wail rang out above and Orla looked up. Her son hung suspended, gripped in the talons of the ominous birds.

"No!" She leapt, but was ambushed by a gaggle of vicious crows herself. She opened her mouth to call out to him, but there was no name to call. If he died right now, there would be no name that the world might remember him by. No evidence he ever existed. What a fool she had been. A selfish, stupid fool.

More crows attacked, pecking and piercing the women. They were like ghosts, impossible to swat. Dozens of crows, supernatural in strength, latched into the flesh of Orla's calves with their sharp talons and lifted her from the ground. She dangled, upside-down, blood rushing to her head and screaming.

More crows circled the altar, close to the floor, faster and faster until they were a blur of empty blackness. The Morrigan emerged from them and stepped back from the swirling pit, a giantess in a black-feathered gown with blood red lips and glowing green eyes. The spray of dark feathers on her head crowned the goddess with a thorn-like malice. She spread out her arms as Orla's son dangled several meters above the hole, suspended by those vile crows.

"Get away from him!" Maeve flipped the table and rushed the altar. The Morrigan stretched a hand in her direction and Maeve froze, her eyes suddenly red and bulging. She clawed at her throat and choked, gasping for breath. The Morrigan raised her arm slowly, lifting Maeve off the ground from ten meters away. The goddess yanked, and Maeve sped through the air, pausing directly above the black, swirling pit. She dangled there for a breathless moment, clawing at her throat, and then the Morrigan slowly unfurled her fingers, and Orla's older sister plunged into the darkness. Orla screamed.

The women's faces quickly turned from fear to rage, and they crept toward the altar like cats ready to pounce. The Morrigan swiped her arm, and the linen-clad Amazons flew backward, becoming pinned to the columns and walls. Orla squirmed and kicked desperately as her son dangled there, wailing, but the talons were too deeply embedded in her legs. She couldn't escape. Biddy Early turned her face upward toward Orla's son and thumped her staff, muttering something in an ancient tongue. The baby plunged into the swirling pit, and his cries went suddenly silent. Orla's scream turned to a guttural wail as she watched death swallow the last of her immediate family.

A blue light flashed before the wail waned from Orla's lungs, and then it rose to the ceiling like a star. It was Alina, aglow in the same blue as her garments. Her eyes burned white as sunlight glistening off snow, and she said, "A great abomination has taken place here…" Her words echoed and repeated in on themselves as if they were spoken through some great labyrinth of tunnels. "The god of this temple draws near now, and the

goddess shall pay for the desecration of his altar, and for the harms inflicted to his son."

His son?

A great roar of wind whipped through the doorway and the windows. Orla shielded her eyes from the rush of dirt and sand.

Acacius stepped through the doorway with a sword at his hip, wearing the armor of a Grecian soldier. With each step, he grew bigger, until he was at least three meters tall. Hard muscles rippled beneath his skin, and his eyes burned a fiery red.

"Bow your heads," Alina announced in a cold echo. "You stand in the presence of Ares, god of war and courage."

Ares stretched an arm out and pulled downward, releasing all of the Amazons that were pinned around the temple, and they hit the floor with graceful thumps. Then he turned his face up toward Orla, who still hung by the crows. The blazing red light of his eyes softened to a dull umber, and tears streamed down her face as she met his gaze. Somewhere in the face of that god, was Acacius.

He reached a hand in her direction and made a caressing motion. She could feel warm fingers on her cheek, just as she did when they laid under the stars. Invisible arms embraced her, lean and strong, and yanked her free of the razor talons, lowering her gently to the ground.

Ares turned back to the Morrigan and spoke, but the sound that came from his mouth was not remotely human. It was like a thousand chariots racing into battle amidst a symphony of clanging swords. It was the whizzing of loosed arrows, and the cries of men who fought with courage. His voice was the sound of valor, nobility, and victory on the battlefield. It was the ambition of every gairm slauigh.

But Orla couldn't understand a single thing he said.

Then Alina's voice rose with his, and in plain language, she made his meaning clear.

"The god Ares is not pleased," Alina said. "He lowered himself to a human form that he might seek out the women of your land who were honored by the poets. Women who were valiant and brave, savage and wild. And what he found was even greater than that.

"But he also found a people under the poor management of chaotic gods. Had the women of your land been bred on his shores, he'd have brought civilization to the whole world by now. What's worse was that you

attacked him when he humbled himself, defenseless, to bring fortune to your people."

The Morrigan's eyes blazed a brighter green, and she took a breath to answer. Her lips and the beak of every crow parted in unison, and the sound that raged from her was an earsplitting assault of screeching birds and howling terror. Orla winced and covered her ears. The voice of the Morrigan was like pure death. But again, she couldn't understand.

Biddy Early's haggard voice now rose with the Morrigan, as Alina's had with Ares. "You had no legal right to traverse the Morrigan's territory or to interfere with her plans," Biddy cried out with the sounds of the Morrigan. "She sent her plague that these women might serve her, and breed tribute for generations to come. Not so they might grow grapes and lounge at the shores of Hella."

Ares responded, and Alina translated more directly this time. "You break every law by standing at my altar, in my land, and desecrating it with the assault of my son." Ares' eyes blazed a brighter, burning red and he reached an arm toward Orla. She went stiff, and then shot into the air, suspended only by his power.

"Orla," Ares and Alina cried, their voices a fever pitch of war and echoing melody. "Grieving mother and daughter of Barbarians; you are a daughter of Hella now, and shall be called Otrera, Queen of the Amazons."

Armor grew from Otrera's skin, a mix of iron and bronze and copper. Around her head something formed. A crown, and the power from it radiated downward and felt as if it would explode from her every limb. Power raged and swirled inside of her, pushing to be set free.

"Otrera!" Ares commanded with Alina's voice, "command your charges, and take your revenge!"

He released her and she fell into a crouch, bellowing the battle cry of the Amazons. The Morrigan tried to explode into crows, but Otrera reached out and crushed her back to form. Duna flipped on to the altar and threw Biddy Early down the swirling black hole. The Morrigan raised an arm as if to strike, but Otrera tore a column from its foundation and launched it at her. The clan tore at the goddess' cloak, crow for crow, and Otrera squeezed and twisted until the dark goddess became a series of slithering, black whips that escaped through the windows. The black hole closed.

"Where is she?" Otrera raged.

“She’s escaped,” Alina answered, and began a descent back to the ground. “But it will take her a while to recover. You will meet her again one day.”

Otrera dropped to her knees and pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes. “She killed my sister… and my son. She’s killed my son.”

“Your sister isn’t dead,” Alina echoed spryly, her feet hitting the floor with a soft tap, “and neither is your son. They are deep in the Between; therefore, you cannot access them.”

“But are they alright?” Otrera wept. “Are they safe?”

“They are safe,” Alina said. “After a great while, the Morrigan will release your sister back to the land of our fathers, where she will be blessed and favored by the goddess. She will reclaim what was stolen, and Queen Maeve will leave both legend and legacy behind. Your son, however, shall be a tyrant, and will not be remembered well. The Morrigan has already named him Mechi, and because he is half god, she will raise him as her own.”

Ortera shook her head and wept, not wanting to hear any more—but Alina continued anyway. “Future sons of this clan will be claimed by the Morrigan, but they shall go on to become the celebrated warriors of the emerald island that bred us. Amazon blood will give rise to great legends, both male and female—but the Amazons shall know no sons. This temple is yours now, to dedicate as you will. Do not grieve, sister. All is as it should be.”

Otrera turned to Ares, unable to make sense of anything Alina was saying. “Acacius…” She yanked up at his loincloth, and he met her weeping gaze. His glowing red eyes softened. “Stay with me… please… Don’t leave me here to grieve my sister and our son….”

Ares humbled himself down to a mortal again, his armor melting and morphing into the old tunic she knew. He knelt in front of her, the Acacius she loved, and pressed his forehead against hers. “I will never be far from you, Orla. I’ll kiss every tear you shed with a blessing, and anything that hurts you shall be cursed.” He closed his eyes, and gently wove his fingers into hers.

“But you cannot stay?” It was more of a resigned statement than a question.

“You’re stronger than any man or any god I’ve ever known,” Acacius said. “I never thought my curious excursion would yield anything so fierce

and noble as you. I will return to you, Orla. *Otrera.* So long as you live, I will return."

She lifted his palm to her face and leaned into it for a long moment. Then she let him go.

Acacius swelled and grew back into Ares, his eyes once again aglow with the burning flames of war. He walked halfway to the door and stopped. Alina joined him.

"Where are you going?" Otrera scrambled to her feet and grabbed her by the shoulder. Alina calmly removed her hand.

"Do not grieve me, sister," Alina said. "I go to Delphi where I shall receive a new name, and serve as Oracle. Men will seek my voice to make war and peace."

Alina grabbed Ares by the hand and lead him through the mouth of the temple. They stepped into the orange light of the harvest moon, and descended the white marble stairs. The Amazons gathered around Otrera, and one by one, they knelt before their queen.

THE SHADOWY ONES

ELIZABETH MERWIN

"Ever since then, Gelert comes to me as if he is my spirit guide. Sometimes I feel him beside me and I draw from his strength."

CHAPTER 1

"Stand up girl!"

Davonna lay stretched out on her back, still holding her wooden sparring sword, staring at the cloudless sky. The sun burned her as much as the gravelly sound of Skooli's voice.

"If ye want to play at being a boy then ye'd best learn to take a hit like a boy." He crossed well-muscled arms and glared at her.

"Just stay down. Best place for a woman is on her back," scoffed Conner O'Shay as he and his group of hangers-on walked past. Davonna growled and sensed Gelert's spirit echoing the growl inside her mind. She squeezed her eyes, gripped the handle of her sword, and strengthened her resolve. *He is nobody, his words mean nothing. Women can be warriors and one day I will be the best this country has ever seen.* Her words felt weak as she lay supine on the ground.

Skooli paced around the two students, mumbling to himself, "Why did I agree to teach a woman?" Davonna cringed as he walked past her, scowling. "No place in the military…can't hold a sword through a battle." The blows of his words hurt as much as the wooden sparring sword. "On your feet girl! Not worth my time…should never have been admitted."

A scar ran from Skooli's right eye down to the edge of his mouth, giving him a permanent scowl. He'd earned the scar in battle, but the nickname was granted by the students. He always seemed to be full of horse piss and rarely gave out compliments. Twenty years of service in the

King’s Army had earned him a place in the academy, but his brash soldier’s attitude meant he’d never be in charge. Not that a guy like him would want to be even if it was the most prestigious military training academy in Scotiael. Despite all this, the stories of his military service were among the reasons Davonna had longed to study here.

She rolled over and pushed up onto her knees. Blood dripped from a cut on her temple, where her sparring partner Raith had slapped her with the flat side of his wooden blade. Doubts started to creep into her mind, as they often did when she was bested. *Why am I doing this? Why couldn’t I just put on a gown and pretend to be the pretty little laird’s daughter everyone thinks I should be?*

Because that isn’t who you are and one day you will prove your mother wrong. Although he chided her, the sound of Gelert’s calm voice in her mind was reassuring. She recalled heated conversations with her mother when she was ten and wanted to learn the sword with the boys of the keep. Each time the subject of her desire to learn the art of weapons came up, and for eight years it came up daily, her mother would say, “Girls are not meant to be warriors, they are too weak to bear arms. A lady’s hands should be soft and wield a sewing needle, not a sword.”

Stand up little pup, you are stronger than this. You must be true to yourself if you wish to be happy. Your true self is destined to bear arms. You mustn’t let these insecurities consume you. She’d been hearing Gelert’s voice since she was four years old. Gelert had been her father’s faithful wolfhound and had saved her life when a wolf tried to kill her. For the past fourteen years, Gelert frequently appeared by her side or entered her mind, usually when she needed a boost of confidence. It seemed so long ago that she had witnessed Gelert’s death by her father’s hand.

CHAPTER 2

Davonna stood and pushed a defiant strand of red hair away from her face. Her fingers brushed across the wound she had just received, which wedged another brick into her wall of resolve. Glaring at Raith, she put on a hardened mask of determination and faced Master Armsman Donalson. With her eyes locked on her dream of being a warrior, she slowly raised the wooden sparring sword upward to indicate she was ready to try again.

Raith took a deep breath and flexed his jaw. Sweat streamed from below his headband and pasted his reddish-blond hair to his reddened face. A bruise was surfacing on his left cheek where a quick flick of her wrist had landed a blow. It gave her a shot of confidence. The corner of her mouth rose in a slight smirk, and she nodded to him from behind her blade.

Skooli grabbed her chin, moving her head from side to side as he looked at the cut. “You’re fine! Begin!” he said in his gruff, no-nonsense Scoti voice as he stepped back.

Raith’s sword arm shot up as she lunged toward him. The sound of wooden blades clacking against each other slowly faded from her mind as she focused on the proper advance and retreat. Her arm vibrated each time the swords connected. The dance seemed to go on for hours: Raith would advance and she would fade back, then she would pass forward and advance on him. Dust rose from the dry ground. Sweat dripped from her hairline but she pushed the distractions aside. She saw Raith fighting to catch his breath.

“One of you end this!” screamed Skooli.

Raith lunged toward her, both hands gripping the hilt of his sword. He took a wide swing at her chest.

Davonna squatted and swept her right foot, hooking it around his leg. She caught his hamstring, knocking him off balance. As he staggered, she jumped up and drove the blunted end of her blade into his chest. Raith fell to the ground with a heavy thump. Davonna kicked his blade aside and stood over him, her blade moving up to his large Adam's apple as it bobbed up and down to the rhythm of his heavy breathing.

"I yield," Raith panted, clutching his chest.

Master Armsman Donalson looked at her, eyes wide, eyebrows raised into his hairline, and said, "Go get that cut looked at, Davonna." She thought she saw him nod in approval as he turned and walked away.

Davonna reached a hand out to help Raith to his feet.

"Thanks," he said as he brushed dirt out of his hair and clothes.

Still holding his hand, Davonna saw a flash of Raith with a touch of gray in his beard. He was wearing a military officer's uniform and standing beside a dark-haired man with gray at his temples. She pulled her hand away and tried to casually brush it on her shirt. Seeing visions made her uncomfortable. They'd been randomly happening since Gelert was killed.

CHAPTER 3

Davonna and Raith walked across the dusty field of the training ground, making their way to the Medical Academy. Arwain University consisted of four separate academies: a martial academy, a magic academy, an engineering academy, and a medical academy. The four branches of the university were separated by walls and had distinctly different architecture. The martial academy was the starkest, with square buildings that had few windows and even fewer plants.

In the two years she had attended the university, Davonna had never wanted to visit any of the other schools. “Have you ever been to the other academies?’” she asked Raith as they walked through the gate leading into the medical academy. She looked around and saw plants growing in beds along every wall. As she drew closer, she recognized rosemary, oregano, and lavender. It reminded her of her mother’s garden back home.

“I’ve been to the medical academy a few times. My class started learning what the engineers do as part of this year’s teachings, but I have never been to the magic academy,” Raith replied.

She and Raith had been sparring partners on many occasions and had grown to be close friends. He was older than her by a year and had been studying at the martial academy longer. She knew he would graduate soon and hoped they would reconnect once she completed her training. She was sure her older sister would inherit the lands, leaving her free to find her own place in the world. The unfortunate death of her mother four years ago, and her father knowing the right people at the University, had finally given her the opportunity to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a warrior. She was one of the first women to train at the academy.

“You’ve really improved, Davonna,” Raith said. “I remember when you first arrived, you seemed so timid but determined.”

“Yeah, so how do you see me now?” Davonna asked.

“Definitely not timid,” Raith responded with a laugh while rubbing his cheek. His brown eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun as he continued, “I’d still say you are determined though. I don’t think I have ever met a girl so set on being as good a fighter as the men.”

“And yet I am still considered a girl,” said Davonna with a touch of bitterness.

“I meant no offense. You are better with almost every weapon than most of the men who train at the academy,” Raith pleaded as he turned to look at her.

“Thanks,” Davonna replied. “I don’t mean to sound unappreciative - it’s just that I still struggle to believe I even belong here. All my life I’ve heard people say women are weaker and must be protected. Pricks like Connor say the same thing, which can make it hard to believe otherwise.”

She felt Gelert’s presence and instinctively reached her hand down to scratch between his ears as she continued, “When I was four years old, I made up my mind I would learn to protect myself and maybe one day even teach others how to protect themselves.”

Raith followed the movement of her hand and squinched his eyes, “Why? What happened?”

Davonna clenched her teeth and swallowed hard, “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Oh come on, you are one of my closest friends. I’ve told you most of my deepest secrets,” Raith begged. “For once won’t you let down your guard and share one of yours?”

Sighing heavily, Davonna blocked out the image of Gelert looking up at her with his ears laid back and grudgingly gave in.

CHAPTER 4

Davonna looked around the courtyard to make sure no one was close enough to listen. Groups of boys and men in clean, unripped clothes rushed from the dormitory to other buildings in the square that made up the Medical Academy, but no one was near them.

Looking toward the whitewashed building where the clinic was located, she continued, “Well, as you know, my Da is a great laird in the north of the isle. He had a pack of wolfhounds, but one hound in particular was his favorite. He named that hound Gelert. He was a fine hunting dog, bred from a long line of fine wolfhound hunters and large for his breed. Gelert and my Da were closely bonded and he loved that dog as if he were his child. Gelert was also my protector. If I fell Gelert would be there to lick my face and make sure I was OK. Then he would nudge me to get up and retry whatever I had been doing. Although we weren’t as closely bonded as he and my Da, Gelert always made me feel like he was my big brother. I would talk to him sometimes, and I often thought he understood what I was saying.”

Raith stopped walking and looked at her in surprise.

“What!” Davonna said.

“Nothing, go on,” Raith said as they continued walking.

“As he began to age, Gelert would stay home rather than go on the hunt, especially after I was born. Once in a while Gelert would disappear for a few days, sometimes returning with cuts and spots of blood on his muzzle and ears. Da suspected he was running with a pack of dogs and hoped he’d found himself a mate among them.”

“One day when Gelert was eight years old and I was four, Da caught word of a pack of wolves roaming the countryside. Da gathered a group of huntsmen and put together a hunt to find them. Before he left, he called for Gelert and spoke to him as if he were one of his men-at-arms.”

“I watched my Da get down on one knee, grab his loyal hound’s gray muzzle on both sides and look Gelert in the eyes. “As your laird, I am trusting you with the welfare of my wee bonny lass, Gelert,” he told the dog. Gelert looked at him and bowed his head as if acknowledging the responsibility my Da, Laird Ard-Greimne, had placed upon him. Gelert sat faithfully by my side as my Da and his huntsmen rode off into the woods.”

“Later that night Gelert woke to the sound of another dog walking around the house. He nudged me awake and pushed me under the bed upon which I’d been sleeping. As I peered out from under the bed Gelert looked into my eyes, and in my mind, I heard him say, *Stay in the shadow and dinna fasch little pup, I will protect you with my life.”*

“This was the first time I remember hearing him,” Davonna said in a distant voice as she continued the story.

“I saw Gelert’s hackles immediately go up as he left the bedroom, leaving me safe under the bed. He let out a low growl and slinked away from the doorway and into the hall.

“Peeking out from under the shadows of the bed I saw a giant wolf cross in front of the door. My entire body began to tremble and I was worried it might hear me. The two dogs circled each other, emitting low growls. From the hallway I heard, *You are not one of us and you will not be sire to that litter of half-breeds*. The gray wolf stopped in front of the half-opened door. I held my breath as I watched saliva drip from his clenched jowls. *Tonight, I will take from you one you love and take you from one who loves you,*” the wolf growled.”

Raith’s steps faltered as his head swivelled between looking at where he was going and watching her.

“Suddenly the wolf pushed the door open and bolted into the bedroom where I lay hiding. He dropped his head and golden eyes stared at me cowering under the bed. Terrified, I watched as Gelert launched himself at the wolf and locked his jaws around the back of its neck. They fought viciously, tearing fur and pieces of skin away. Blood splattered on my face but I didn’t scream. After what felt like an eternity it grew quiet. I opened

my eyes and poked my head out of my hiding place. The wolf lay whining in a corner and eventually became silent."

"Gelert limped over to the bed. Blood covered his grey and white coat and there were wounds all over his body. I had been so scared that I cried aloud at the sight of him. He dipped his head and licked away my tears. Exhaustion seemed to fill his eyes as he looked at me and said, *Stay where you are little pup; I must alert your father to this.*

"Gelert slowly left the room. I heard a loud exhale as his weakened body collapsed in the hallway. I remained under the bed and after the fear and emotions abated, I drifted off to sleep. When my Da got home and came up the stairs he saw his faithful and beloved dog covered in blood. He bounded past him into my bedroom but didn't see where I was lying. In a blind fury, he withdrew his sword and buried it into Gelert's side."

Raith drew in a quick breath and placed his hands over his mouth.

Davonna cleared her throat and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"At the sound of Gelert's yelp, I woke in the other room and screamed. Looking around the room, my Da noticed the dead wolf in the corner. In that moment his heart shattered. He realized his faithful Gelert had protected me just as he had tasked him to do. In his fearful haste, my Da had doubted his dog's loyalty and love and killed him."

Fidgeting with a button on her shirt, Davonna continued. "My father's betrayal was more than he could bear. He fell to the floor next to Gelert and large tears flowed from his eyes. As my mother carried me down the hall, I could hear his throat catching as the deep sobs caused him to cough. At times he would yell out in agony, 'Oh my Gelert, why didn't you tell me? What have I done?'"

Davonna coughed to clear her tight throat and continued.

"The next morning Da brought his bondsmen and their families together. Since Gelert was a dog my Da had dug a hole just outside of the family cemetery and there we buried Gelert as if he were a member of our family. Struggling to hold back tears, my Da spoke of loyalty and honor. His composure broke as he said, 'I violated that trust when I killed him because I thought he had harmed my daughter. I have asked Master Brunson to carve a headstone in his honor so none of us will forget his loyalty.'

“Ever since then, Gelert comes to me as if he is my spirit guide. Sometimes I feel him beside me, and I draw from his strength. He gives me the courage to believe I am as capable as a man at protecting myself. He offers advice when I doubt myself.” Davonna wiped tears from her eyes as the memory cleared. “I don’t know why I just told you all that,” she said with an embarrassed laugh.

CHAPTER 5

Raith wiped a tear from his eye as they walked through the medical clinic doors. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell anyone you have magical skills and a soft heart for animals. That would completely ruin your stone-cold warrior reputation. Have you ever considered learning in the magical academy?”

“I’ve never given it much thought,” Davonna said. “I’ve only ever wanted to be a warrior.”

“I have a friend who studies here, let’s go find him,” Raith said as he walked down the whitewashed hall.

They walked into a room with beds lining both walls. Raith approached a young man about his age and build and cleared his throat. “Hey Jonas, would you mind taking a look at my friend Davonna?”

As he turned around, she was immediately drawn to his kind blue eyes. She took in a sharp breath and felt her heart skip as she realized he was also a younger version of the man she had seen standing next to Raith in her vision. His dark hair was pulled away from his face and held in place by a thin leather band. Davonna thought he might be the handsomest man she had ever seen.

He smiled at her but turned to look at Raith. She saw them step closer to each other and Jonas reached up and lightly put his fingers on the bruise on Raith’s face. As they whispered to each other Raith reached up and pushed a hair out of Jonas’ face, tucking it under his leather headband.

Feeling a bit like an intruder, Davonna cleared her throat. “Ah-hem, didn’t we come here so he could look at me Raith?” she said.

“Oh yeah, sorry,” said Raith blushing.

Jonas's hands gently touched the cut Raith had given her. He pressed around it, asking if it hurt. When she responded no, he turned to Raith and said, "I don't see any wood under the skin and there isn't much of a bump. Just keep an eye on it and try to keep it clean. I know that can be difficult for you warrior types."

Jonas walked them to the door and as they were saying goodbye, she saw them inconspicuously squeeze each other's hand.

They stepped into the afternoon sun and Davonna turned to Raith, "Are you and Jonas, umm, together?"

Bright red colored his cheeks as Raith said, "Yeah, since right after we both arrived at the university. I'll tell you about it later. Right now, I'm famished, let's go see what is being served for lunch today."

"Well, that is a secret you've kept from me," Davonna said, laughing as she wrapped her arm around Raith's shoulders and walked down the stairs.

CHAPTER 6

Raith and Davonna entered the dining hall laughing and jabbing each other. Davonna spotted two seats at a table along the wall. Shouting over the cacophony of male voices talking over cutlery hitting tables, she said, “I’ll get those seats, you get your plate first.”

She did her best to weave through the maze of chairs and tables without bumping into anyone. Her route took her past a table of older students. She’d never felt comfortable when they gathered into groups. Large packs of men made her hackles rise. Conner O’Shay was sitting at a table along her path laughing with the man sitting across from him. Any time she was around him she felt like he looked at her the way a mangy dog might look at an injured animal: easy prey. His beady eyes seemed too close together and his shaggy head of unkempt hair only made the image more real.

She firmed her shoulders and walked by the table, but Conner reached out and grabbed her by the forearm, pulling her down to sit on his lap.

“Won’t ya have a seat lassie, I’m sure I can entertain ya better than that pretty boy Raith.”

As he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer a flash of her twelve-year-old self skipped across her mind. She reached down and pulled a dagger from inside her boot, pressing the tip against his groin.

“Let go of me right now and you might have children one day. Play it off like I said something funny and your cronies won’t need to know I got the better of you,” she whispered in his ear as she dug the tip of the dagger in a little deeper.

Conner's eyes went wide, and he released his grip. "Akh, beg your pardon lassie, you aren't the goat I got the better of last night." His pack of hyenas laughed as he pushed her away and helped her gain her balance. A vision of a bloodied Conner lying on a battlefield shot into her mind as he released her.

Conner sat back down rubbing his crotch and mumbling under his breath. Davonna turned and shaking her head she walked away.

It wasn't until she got to the table that Davonna released the breath she'd been holding. Shadows of the memory still lingered. She was twelve and had been out riding with her dog Selkey. They were racing through the woods, sometimes rejoining the trail, other times dashing between trees. She was whooping and laughing and Selkey would occasionally bark and jump toward her. Sometimes she could see the ghost of Gelert running beside Selkey. Selkey was one of the pups from the litter Gelert had sired; he had grown into a large midnight black hound whose look could stop even the bravest man. His size came from his sire Gelert and his wolf-mother Silvermoon. Davonna smiled as she remembered the day she and her father had found the wolf-mother. After the mother abandoned the litter, she and her father brought the puppies home. As she grew older her ability to communicate with Selkey the way she could with Gelert grew stronger.

She looked around the dining hall as her thoughts drifted back into the memory. *Danger little pup*! she recalled Gelert's voice screaming in her mind.

She burst out of the trees onto the trail and into a group of ruffians. There were four of them in tattered clothes, with unkempt beards and dirt smears on their faces. They stopped abruptly and their eyes flew open. All four yelled, and two of them reached for blades at their hips. Her horse came to an abrupt stop in front of the group and she was thrown off. As she got to her feet one of the men grabbed her and wrapped his arm around her neck, pulling her close against him. She almost vomited from the stench of his body. Just as she started to scream, he placed a grimy hand over her mouth.

"Now, now pretty little lady, you don't want to draw anyone's attention to us," said the man holding her.

The other three came closer and one of them said, "Well isn't she a fine fire-headed lass?"

Davona squirmed and tried to break the hold of the man who restrained her. “And feisty too,” he said laughing. “Whatta ya say we have some fun wi’ her” and he pushed her into the arms of a different thug.

They made a game of pushing her from one man to another until she lost her balance and fell to the ground. Selkey circled from a distance, barking and growling.

“Oh-ho, is this how ye want it little girl? I’m sure we can please ya while you’re flat on your back, eh boys?” said her first captor, laughing.

Just as he knelt to lie on top of her Selkey lunged at him. The man tried to punch Selkey and was rewarded with powerful jaws locking onto his arm. He screamed as Selkey’s teeth buried into his flesh.

Davonna scurried through the dirt and leaves to get out of the way as the other men moved to attack Selkey. Finally managing to get to her feet, heart pounding like a bodhran in her chest, Davonna reached for the blade she always wore in her boot. She slashed at one of the men and heard another dog bark. Her blade sliced across his forearm before he pushed her to the ground.

As she was falling a grey flash darted past her and she heard the man scream “There are more dogs!”.

“It’s a wolf, there is a pack of wolves! Let’s get out of here!” another man screamed as more barking echoed through the trees.

CHAPTER 7

The four men ran off into the woods, each going in a different direction. Davonna looked around and saw Selkey and the grey wolf facing each other. Selkey tilted his head and lowered his tail. The grey wolf glanced to her left and whined with longing. Davonna watched as Gelert moved to her and rubbed his muzzle against hers.

I mean you no harm, my son, Davonna heard the old she-wolf say, not seeming to notice Gelert as she approached Selkey. Selkey's tail rose and began to wag. They sniffed at each other and Selkey lay on the ground, rolling onto his back in submission.

Davonna looked at the aged she-wolf and said, "Thank you for helping us."

You have raised my son well, little pup. I am grateful. When he is ready to have a litter of his own, look for my pack in the woods near the cave where I birthed him. And with that, she rubbed her muzzle against Selkey and dashed off into the woods.

Gelert moved as if to follow but instead lay down and watched her leave, eyes partially closed and darting between the fading wolf and the two who remained.

Selkey came to her and as she wrapped her shaking arms around his large neck, she vowed she would never be so helpless again. She would train harder at her weapons and learn to defend herself by sparring against the biggest men in her father's court. When she was old enough, she would insist on attending the finest military training academy in the country whether they wanted to teach a girl or not.

Davonna was pulled back into the present when Raith returned with his plate and sat down. “What’s the matter?” he said. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Davonna’s hands were shaking, but she wasn’t sure if it was from fear or fury. “Nothing, I just had another memory. I guess it came up from me telling you about Gelert.” She pushed her hands under the table and clasped them together hoping it would make them stop shaking.

Leaning forward to peek at Raith’s plate she said, “Looks like another gourmet meal. I’m going to get a plate.” She pushed away from the table and chose a different route to get to the food line, one that didn’t take her close to Conner and his table of hyenas.

The food in the dining hall was nothing like what the cook at home made and tonight it seemed even less palatable. Davonna pushed the dry meat around on her plate, picked up the piece of bread, and soaked it in gravy. She took a bite and washed it down with a swig of mead, but she’d lost her appetite.

“I thought you were famished, what happened? Raith asked.

“I don’t know, I just suddenly am not very hungry,” Davonna said as she stood up. Taking a deep pull on her mead she looked at Raith, said, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” and walked out.

CHAPTER 8

When she got to her room Davonna secured the door but didn't light a candle. She was one of only a few women training in the martial academy and as a laird's daughter, she was privileged to have her own room. She looked around the tight space, taking in the small bed that was almost too short for her tall body, the trunk at the foot where every piece of clothing she had brought was stuffed in tightly, and the single chair in the corner. She didn't care how small it was because it was her private kennel and gave her safety and solitude at the end of the day. Davonna didn't bother with the bed or the chair as she folded into a ball on the floor and burst into tears. Her body heaved as she sobbed. She wished Selkey were there to comfort her rather than at her family's home.

A short time later her eyes were washed out and the tightness in her chest began to subside. Still curled into a ball, she began to pound on the floor with clenched fists. Occasionally she would let out a small yell and pound on the floor some more.

It's good you get this out of your system without anyone seeing you, little pup, she heard Gelert say.

Feeling his presence was a comfort but sometimes she wished badly to wrap her arms around his furry head like she had when he was alive. She had never been without a dog. Since she was four, she had always had Selkey by her side. She missed his physical presence greatly. Tonight, for the first time since she was a wee bairn, she wished she could fall asleep with Gelert curled up beside her.

“Why do men have to be so violent toward women, Gelert? Why must women live in fear that some man is going to abuse her in some way? I am so tired of feeling small and helpless around men.”

It has always been thus, little pup. It is usually the weakest, whether in stature or mind, who prey the worst on others. If you show them weakness it only makes them feel more powerful. But be cautious, little pup. With evil men, if you stand up to them, they look for cowardly ways to cause harm. You must always be vigilant. The words sounded so much like something her father would say. She ached to hear her Da’s voice and feel his comforting arms envelop her in a bear hug.

Davonna pounded on the floor one last time and crawled onto her bed. Not bothering to get out of her dusty clothes, she kicked off her boots and fell asleep.

She woke the next morning to sunlight shining through the one window warming her face. Her tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of her mouth and her eyes were swollen half shut. She pushed herself out of the bed and stumbled to the water basin. A few splashes of water on her face and rubbed into her eyes made her feel better. Rubbing salt across her teeth to clean off the gummy feeling, she took a swig of clean water from the flagon, brushed the dust and wrinkles out of her clothes, and sat on the bed to put her boots on.

I am a strong and capable woman. I can do anything most men can do. I will not allow myself to feel inferior. I have the strength of a stone troll and the determination of a turtle crossing a desert. I will become the best fighter this academy has ever trained. It wasn’t the first time she had said this mantra and she was sure it wouldn’t be the last. But with each repetition, her confidence and determination grew.

CHAPTER 9

It was Fifthday of the fourth week of the month and that meant open sparring. Six months had passed since her encounter with Conner in the dining hall. Davonna had spent hours training. Most mornings she was up before the other students and often before the academy cadre. She would run a couple of laps around the training arena, stretch, and then work through her sword or axe drills until it was time for the morning meal. She found it helped center her mind to watch the sun rise over the distant hills that surrounded Arwain University.

Many days she let her mind wander back to her childhood. She'd been told redheads have a fiery temper, but she always thought hers was more grit and determination. She reflected on the fights she had with her mother whenever she discouraged Davonna from learning weapons. Although her mother didn't want her daughter to act like a boy, she always encouraged Davonna to try her hardest at everything she did and to carry herself with confidence. Her father taught her to never give up and to face challenges with strength and conviction. Knowing that her spirit dog Gelert was always close by gave Davonna comfort during her early morning routine.

Her preferred hand weapon was the sword, but she was also highly proficient with the axe and staff. Fifthday sparring only used hand weapons never bows of any kind. On Fifthday of the fourth week, you never knew who you would spar. The other three weeks of the month students at the same level of training sparred within their respective classes. On Fifthday of the fourth week all of the martial academy came together, so it might be a student ready to graduate or a student who had

arrived a week prior. Fifthday of the fourth week made Davonna nervous, but usually in a good way.

The students gathered in the main sparring arena. Groups of boys clustered together in knots based on their age and year within the academy. The new ones spoke in nervous whispers while the more senior students laughed and shoved each other. Davonna saw the three other females clustered into their own knot. She nodded as she walked past, but refused when invited to join their segregated pack. She saw Raith standing with Jonas and walked over to them.

“Hey Davonna,” Raith waved as she approached.

Jonas held his hand out and bowed, “A pleasure to see you again, My Lady.”

“Oh please, none of that, especially in a place like this,” Davonna said, laughing.

The Head Armsman, Master McDaniel, who served as the magistrate of the academy, began to call names. When two names were called, the contenders would move into the sparring arena. Master Armsman Donalson would then tell them which weapon they were to use. On his command, they would begin to spar.

Blows to the head were grounds for dismissal on Fifthday because the cadre knew people’s emotions tended to get elevated. The roar of the crowd and egos driven to prove themselves caused students to lose control and swing harder. Any other time the students were so closely watched and controlled that the cadre didn’t worry about harmful headshots.

Contenders would fight until the Master Armsman or the Magistrate felt the winner could be called. Whenever a first-year student was pitted against a fifth-year student the fights didn’t last long. Students who were closer in experience always worked the crowd into a frenzy, with factions rooting for their favorite contender.

Raith was called early and went against a second year. His classmates hooted and hollered for him as he toyed with the younger student. Jonas smiled as he watched him. The young man put up a good fight, but it was clear Raith was better and the fight ended quickly.

CHAPTER 10

As the day grew warmer the excitement within the crowd of students grew more elevated. Not everyone would be called to spar. For some students that was a good thing, but most wanted an opportunity to prove themselves. Davonna always longed to prove herself.

The Magistrate called the next two names, “Conner O’Shay.” One section of the arena let out a loud cheer. “Davonna Ard-Greimne.”

The arena suddenly grew very quiet. Somehow word had gotten around about their dislike for one another. Davonna’s heart skipped a beat as she stepped forward. She firmed her face so no emotion could show and walked toward Master Armsman Donalson. “Conner the sword, Davonna the staff,” Master Armsman Donalson said.

As they walked to the weapons racks Davonna heard Conner whisper, “This is going to be fun. You’ll be where you belong, flat on your back again before you can bat your pretty eyelashes.”

Davonna’s hands began to sweat as she picked out a staff and walked to her side of the arena. She took a few swings to loosen her muscles and get a feel for the balance of the weapon. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and slowly let it out. *You have seen him fight; you know how to beat him,* she heard Gelert say. Her mind’s eye saw him at the edge of the arena which gave her a burst of adrenaline that shot through her body. She set her face to determination and opened her eyes to face Conner.

“Fight!” yelled Skooli as he stepped back from between them.

Conner charged her like a berserker. Eyes blazing, he raised his sword to swing at her chest, then stepped to the side. Davonna was almost caught off-guard by his sloppy style but managed to move the staff in front of her.

The impact of the sword striking the staff whipped her body sideways and she staggered back. When she had regained her footing, she discovered the staff was broken into two equal pieces.

“Ha!” yelled Conner. “Now what are you going to do girl?”

Skooli stepped forward as if to stop the fight.

“No!” yelled Davonna with fire in her eyes. “I will fight with this.”

Conner looked at her in shock but recovered quickly when she advanced.

“Fight me,” Davonna said as she circled her arms around and lunged toward Conner.

Conner swung and Davonna blocked. Then Davonna went on the attack and Conner defended. Once or twice Davonna even managed to knock him to the ground but he always bounced back up. Calm descended on her as she moved through the steps of movements that were etched in her mind from hours of training. She swung her arms in synch with her feet. She could see the frustration building in Conner.

“You’re a girl, you’re too weak to beat me,” Conner said in a failed attempt to provoke her.

His face grew redder and his eyes, which always appeared evil to Davonna, grew meaner as they tightened around the edges. When his efforts to knock the two pieces of the staff out of her hands proved futile, he blew out a frustrated breath and took a swing at Davonna’s head.

The crowd in the arena drew in an audible breath.

Instinct told her to duck but it was too late as she felt the crack of the sparring sword on the back of her head and her knees buckled. Head Armsman McDaniel yelled stop but Davonna’s adrenaline was flowing too strongly. She fell to the ground and as Conner yelled “That’s right, on your back where you belong” she threw one half of the broken staff toward him.

She heard Conner yell in pain and standing, noticed the broken staff lodged in his arm.

“Argh! You bitch!” he yelled as he pulled it out. She advanced quickly, her right arm moving in a rapid figure eight as if it were holding a sword.

Davonna stepped in and slammed the remaining half of the staff into Conner’s side. He exhaled deeply and bent over. As he did so Davonna dropped and swept her right foot out catching him at the ankles. Somewhere in the back reaches of her mind she heard someone yell “Yes!”

Conner fell to the ground and Davonna jumped on his chest, burying a knee into his breastplate. Pointing the jagged end of the broken staff into his throat she quietly said, “Yield.”

Conner turned his head and spat.

“Yield!” Davonna yelled.

Master Armsman Donalson stepped forward and said “Mister Conner, you have been bested and Lady Davonna has proven to be the better warrior today. You must yield or face punishment.”

Conner looked at Davonna and said, “I won’t forget this.” Then in a much louder voice, he said, “I yield!”

Before letting him up Davonna quietly said “Best place for a guy like you is on your back. Too bad you won’t live long enough to enjoy a full life.” As Davonna moved away from Conner, she heard the arena erupt with cheers. Raith and Jonas came running to her.

“Let me look at your head,” Jonas said. “You really should go to the Academy of Medicine and let someone experienced examine you more closely. You might have deeper injuries than I can see.”

CHAPTER 11

Davonna held onto the broken staff as Jonas and Raith helped her to the clinic. Jonas calmly explained what happened during the fight to one of the medical cadre. Davonna was thankful for his knowledge of medicine as her legs began to weaken and her vision grew blurry. By the time she was settled into a bed, she had a pounding headache and the bright sun forced her to close her eyes.

"Try not to fall asleep," said the physician. "That hit to your head was pretty hard; sleeping right now is dangerous."

Jonas and Raith stayed with her until the evening meal bell chimed. As her head began to nod Jonas said, "Remember, don't sleep." They said goodbye and quietly left the room.

Two days later a very rested Davonna left the medical academy. Walking back to her room she noticed people looking at her. Some turned and nodded and one or two even clapped. She entered her room and placed the broken staff on her bed. She looked at it closely and thought about how the jagged edge of the other half had embedded in Conner's arm.

That could really do some harm if the balance was good and someone threw it, she thought as an idea began to form.

Davonna left the room with images of spears and javelins dancing through her mind. Her feet carried her across the familiar path to the dining hall. She entered the dining hall and came to a stop as it grew quiet. Suddenly all but one table of students stood, placed their open hands over their hearts, and bowed their heads. Davonna looked to the single table that had remained seated, expecting to see Conner. It was full of his cronies, but Conner was nowhere to be seen.

She found Raith seated at a table near the cleaning station. Sliding into the seat next to him she lowered her head and quietly asked, “What is this all about?”

“Didn’t you hear?” said Raith. “Conner was expelled for that blow he gave you to your head. Believe it or not, most people didn’t like him because he was a bully.”

“Well, this’ll make my life here easier, but I wonder where he’ll be hiding when I graduate?”

Students kept stopping at the table, congratulating her on the fight. Some of the older students even asked if they could spar with her. Davonna was uncomfortable at first, mumbling thanks under her breath, but as more students approached, she gained confidence.

“You would be a great teacher Davonna,” Raith said as one of his classmates walked away. “You are proficient with almost every weapon, you know how to remain calm even when the fight gets rough, and you never back down. You should ask Skooli if you can help train new students.”

They finished their meal and walked out into the crisp fall night.

“I think I would enjoy teaching, especially people who seem weaker and lack confidence. I’d like to show them that size and strength don’t matter, it’s all in how you use the weapons you have. That and just not giving up,” she said with a smile.

As she walked back to her room Raith’s words echoed in her mind.

CHAPTER 12

Davonna spent her last year in the academy fine-tuning her martial skills. Raith and Jonas had graduated and left to serve in the King's Army. Before they departed, they vowed to get back together one day. Everyone cried and hugged and as they walked away Davonna hoped it truly would happen.

She continued her routine of rising early to train on her own. With the idea of the javelin firmly embedded in her mind, she began to incorporate throwing weapons into her training. Classes were going well, and her new-found popularity had gained her new friends. She spent her afternoons at the armory, asking questions and hoping to learn how to work metal. One day the head armorer noticed the drawings she had made of the weapon that had formed in her mind.

"What ya have there, lassie?" he asked.

Her new confidence had given her the courage to speak more boldly with the cadre. "Just an idea I've had since that fight with Conner O'Shay."

"Akh, that was a hell of a fight. I was sure he had ya until you threw that stick at 'im," the head armorer said. "Brilliant maneuverer."

Davonna's heart filled with pride at the compliment. "Thanks," she said raising her head to look him in the eyes. "That is what gave me the idea for this weapon. The way the shards of wood embedded in his arm like a harpoon. I never saw him after the fight but I bet it left a scar."

"Well, I'm happy to work with ya to see what we can come up with, lass. Help yourself to the tools and tell me if the boys in here give you any trouble."

Davonna thanked him as she gathered her notes. “I have to go teach,” she said. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

She had followed up on Raith’s suggestion and asked Master Armsman Donalson if she could help train new students. For the last six months of her time in the academy, she was the sole trainer for the first-year class.

On the day she graduated the magistrate called her into his meeting room.

“You have become the finest student this academy has ever seen, Davonna. You always got back up, you were humble in your defeats and your victories, and you willingly shared your knowledge with others. You consistently showed grit and determination, and I must tell you, I am thankful we took you in as a student,” the Headmaster said.

Skooli nodded his head in agreement, “Aye lass, I was reluctant to teach you, but you have proven me wrong. Women may not have the same strength, but you taught me that what they lack in physical force they more than make up for in cunning and determination. I’d stand by your side in battle any day.”

Davonna was speechless at the accolades. Her heart swelled with pride as she held her head higher and stood taller. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Gelert standing by the door. He nodded his head in agreement and wagged his tail.

Davonna walked to her room feeling confident and proud. All the hard work she had put in throughout her life was paying off. She was finally seen as an equal to the other warriors who studied at Schulodin Martial Academy.

She closed the door of her room and sat on her bed. Gelert came to her and bowed his head as if giving her a hug.

It is time for me to take leave and return to my pack, little pup, he said in his deep gentle voice.

Davonna’s heart stopped beating for a moment as he continued.

You have found your strength. You no longer need me to guide you. You are a strong, confident woman who will one day be a dominant pack leader.

Davonna reached for his muzzle, wanting desperately to touch him. “But I’m your little pup,” she said as a sob broke and tears began to fall.

No, Gelert said. *From this day forward, you are Scathach, The Shadowy One. You will always be a member of my pack and hold a large piece of my*

heart. If your need is great, I will return. Now it is time for you to follow your dreams. You must continue to gain prowess as a warrior so that one day you can open your own martial academy.

Davonna bowed her head trying, not to cry.

Lift your head Scathach and look at me, Gelert commanded.

He was joined by Silvermoon as she watched him slowly fade from her sight, leaving a small presence in the recesses of her mind.

THE BASE OF THE TOTEM

MISKI HARRIS

CLAN LEGEND

The Seminole nation is divided into clans. Currently, there are eight active clans in existence. They are Panther, Bear, Deer, Wind, Toad, Snake, and Otter. There were many other clans, such as Alligator and Owl, but they are now extinct.

Extinction occurs because clan lineage is maternal. When a man marries, he becomes a member of his wife's clan, as do the children born of these unions. Intermarriage within a clan is forbidden, so when the last woman in a clan dies, the clan is forever closed.

According to Seminole folklore, the Creator made every animal and housed them in a large shell. He sealed the shell shut and nestled it in a mountain range where it would remain until something caused it to open and release the animals. As each exited the shell, the Creator gave them a name and a strength.

Of all the animals, Panther was the Creator's favorite, so His greatest hope was that it would be the first to emerge through the opening ultimately created by a natural force.

Eventually the roots of a nearby tree cracked the shell. Wind, whose gift became to allow the world to breathe, then widened the opening and ensured that Panther was the first animal to emerge and make its home on earth. Pleased, the Creator gave Panther the gift of knowledge and the power to heal. Because of this, Panther is the largest and strongest of the Seminole clans. Their members often become healers and leaders.

Next to emerge was the bird, who was given the purpose of overseeing the world and immediately spread its wings and flew away.

OUT OF THE SHELL

This was really it. College, med school, residency, fellowship —it seemed like it would never end but it had, and the time had finally come. Parker Dean had remained until the Green Corn Dance as his mother and grandfather requested. He had to admit, he was glad he'd done so. His grandfather, Nathan Dean, was the bundle carrier and had taken Parker with him to the Corn Dance grounds, where they set up the ceremonial logs after which, while praying, Nathan lit the fire from which all the other fires in the village would be lit.

Parker had participated in the rituals that made up the tribal rite of purification and felt renewed and rejuvenated when the four days of ceremony came to an end.

The heartwarming memories were interrupted by a knock at his bedroom door. Standing in the hall was his mother, a small colorful bag in her hand.

"This is from my fire. Take it to keep the Corn Dance fire with you wherever you make your home. Since you will never have a wife, it is still my job to ensure the traditional fire is always with you."

Parker accepted the small bag and placed it gently on his dresser. *I'll have to get a box to keep it safe.* "This is a first. I've left home before, so why now?"

"You left for school, but you were always close by, and I knew you would come home for the new year. Now you're going to make your own home and will have the responsibility for the lives of others. You will have to build your own fires." She hugged him tightly. "Dinner will be ready

soon.” She glanced around the cluttered room with a doubtful expression. “I’ll leave you to finish your packing.”

Parker was still separating and organizing his belongings when his grandfather walked in. He seemed to have a hard time navigating the multiple boxes and suitcases scattered throughout the room.

“If it’s taking you this long to decide what to take with you, maybe you should reconsider leaving.”

“Grandfather, this is my calling. You said so the day I began my studies. I’m a healer and I want to go where my gift is needed.”

Nathan held a painted box. He opened it and placed the small pouch left behind by Mattie inside, then handed it to Parker. Inside, next to the pouch, Parker saw a tiny totem, ornately carved. At its base was the head of a panther. He’d known that symbol all his life as it was the symbol of his clan. What was strange was the bird figure at the top.

“It’s beautiful, Grandfather, but isn’t that an owl? Why would you carve one on the top since that clan is extinct?”

“The Creator came to me in a dream. I carved that totem for you on His instruction.” He took the tiny sculpture from Parker. Nathan had a trance-like look in his eyes as he continued to speak.

“As you know, the panther was the first animal to emerge from the shell set on Earth by the Creator. We believe this story in part is why our clan is so large and powerful. That is why a panther is appropriately placed at the bottom. Never forget the base of the totem is its strength, bearing up all that our nation stands for.

“The next animal to emerge was a bird. Some believe it was an owl which flew off immediately to survey the world.”

He continued to affectionately stroke the little totem, slowly outlining each of the animals between the panther and the owl with his finger.

“Legend says there were humans that could expel their souls and shift into owl form. They are presumed to be wicked practitioners of dark magic and witchcraft. Embracing such a dark nature separated them from the positive energies of the Creator and created a spiritual weakness within them. This was especially prominent in the women. The Owl clan diminished in size until the last female died, and the clan closed. The bloodline is all but extinct.

“Unofficial legend says the fate of the clan affected males who are two souls the most. The closure and extinction left them essentially alone and

unaffiliated." He indicated the little totem "This figure at the top of this totem represents a troubled soul. He has rejected the evil ways of his ancestors and is alone. This little bird struggles because there is nothing connecting him to the Creator or the true tribal ways. There is no way to annually renew his ties to all that we are, which leaves him at the mercy of predators.

"This is why your mother made sure you carried the home fire with you, so you will always know you are not alone in this world. The ash ensures you carry the strengths of the Panther Clan everywhere you go."

Parker was perplexed by the meaning of all Nathan told him and mesmerized by the beauty of the carving. The totem was an incredible piece of craftsmanship, and he was amazed his grandfather's hands could still accomplish such intricate work.

"That's a beautiful story, however sad, but what has it to do with me?"

Nathan rewrapped the tiny figurine, nestled it back into its wooden container, and gently placed it on top of Parker's packing. "The panther at the bottom of the totem represents you, Parker, a strong alpha. The strong are always meant to bear the infirmities of the weak. Because you are a healer, this must undergird your mission in your new home."

He then pointed to the horse carved atop the panther. "You've always been a maverick, refusing to bend to any will but your own. Unlike so many who are two souls, you've never been afraid or ashamed of who you are. I have been praying for your life partner since the day you came out to the family. I could see the fiery determination of your heart burning in your eyes. It will take a very special mate indeed to stand at your side."

He then moved his hand to the little coyote and owl figures. "The top two are the most confusing. I don't know why an owl and a coyote, of all creatures, must be at the top. Everything the Creator relays to us isn't always meant to be taken literally. Together they can represent the events to come, which will bring you balance and help you maintain your humanity. Or they can be actual creatures which will affect your life and challenge your place in the Creator's hierarchy."

The inclusion of an owl still escaped Parker. After all, the Owl clan was extinct. Even if there were still unaffiliated males bearing the bloodline, how was it even remotely possible that they would even know who they were enough to approach him or try to affect his existence?

“Are you telling me the Creator is going to place evil in my life to bring me to a point of balance? I mean, Grandfather, the owl was the shifted form taken by practitioners of dark magic. I’m going to Panther Hollow to provide positive holistic care to those who need it. What possible good can be served by an evil presence in my life?”

Nathan slowly shook his head. “I never question the Creator when He comes to me. I listen and attend to His bidding.” He then stretched out his hand to indicate the case holding the priceless objects. “All I know is you must take this with you and keep it safe. The rest will reveal itself in time.”

Parker smirked. “So, am I about to start hearing from the Creator in my dreams?”

“Don’t be disrespectful!” Nathan snapped. “If you want to hear from the Creator, you must have an ear inclined to His voice. You’ve known this since you were a child.”

Parker immediately felt ashamed of needing to be rebuked in this way. He’d indeed been raised better and no one, not even the tribal elders, questioned his grandfather on spiritual matters.

Chastened, he spoke quietly. “I’m sorry, Grandfather. I do know better. It’s just that lately I’ve been having strange dreams. I always feel irritable and on edge when I wake up and by the time I pull myself together, I can’t remember the dream. It’s frustrating.”

“Be patient. Clarity will come when you most need it.” Nathan picked up the envelope laying on the bed. “Panther Hollow.” He snorted. “Well, I can almost see the attraction, I guess.” He rose from the bed and proceeded to leave the room, then stopped. Placing one hand on each side of Parker’s face, he leaned in and dropped a gentle kiss at the top of his head.

“Just remember your place in this world. Stay in touch and let me know how this story develops. You have a long ride ahead of you, which you’ll never live to make if you’re late to supper. Let’s go eat.”

OVERSEEING THE EARTH

Julius Grayson groped around slowly with one hand, seeking to silence the disturbing sound on the milk crate that served as his combination table and nightstand. *Damn, it's already Sunday morning?*

Last night he'd walk through the woods talking to the Creator, begging for healing.

He'd felt led to this place years ago after participating in a spiritual ritual, thinking Panther Hollow was going to be an answer to his prayers for healing of his fractured spirit. When he arrived, Julius decided the vision he'd seen that long-ago night in the steamy tent was either a hallucination fueled by whatever was in the pipe the men shared or proof that the Creator got His jollies from manipulating the lives of desperate, unaffiliated men.

During the prior evening, while conducting what he'd come to call his "ground rounds," he ran into Dakota and together they shared a pipe of something Julius hadn't been able to identify. All he knew was that, for one night, his troubles melted into the atmosphere like they had so many years ago. Only this time there was no great vision from the Creator and no encouragement from a group of wise older men. This time there was only respite from his troubles and then sleep.

Now, as Julius crawled out of his makeshift bedroll and hurried to get dressed, his thoughts turned to the mixed blessing he called his part-time job at the Panther Hollow Bed and Breakfast. The brunch service would be starting soon, and Braun would make his life hell if he were late. It was only dishwashing and helping set up the dining room before the guests

started to arrive, but it meant every Sunday he could bring home the meal leftovers.

The few dollars he earned would also get him closer to buying a mat to make his bedroll more comfortable. He was twenty-eight years old, short, and slim. His stature made him look eighteen, but every morning he arose from his makeshift bed feeling more like he was eighty-eight.

Sunday also meant Braun would allow him to shower and wash his clothes in the employee rest area. He packed his clean clothes in his little satchel, picked up the sack holding his laundry, and headed out.

Julius took his usual path through the woods, making note of the changes around him now that spring had arrived. Ordinary humans walking through these woods saw the same grass, trees, and brush. For Julius, autumn brought with it one last burst of color and meant he needed to start preparing for the bitter cold to come. Winter turned everything white with snow and frost and sent Julius to a nearby cave, where he could build a small fire to help him keep warm. Spring and summer brought beauty as flowers burst into bloom and the grasses and leaves became a bright and radiant green. This was the time Julius enjoyed the most. He loved the warm feeling of the sun kissing his skin.

In no time at all, the cedar shake panels of the new colonial-style building came into view. As had become his habit, he stopped to admire the progress on the two-story clinic going up at the edge of the woods. He'd always thought the owner's decision to embed the back quarter of the building into the woods strange, but he loved it at the same time. The location and design camouflaged the rear so it completely hid that part of the building from normal eyesight. Julius smiled. *But not from mine. I'm going to have to find time to explore this some more.*

Today there was something new. A giant dream catcher hung in the space between the second-floor windows and was centered above the entrance. He noticed Carlson Peterson working on the door and stopped to admire his handiwork. He'd painted a flag in the white, black, red, and yellow stripes of the Seminole Nation. A sign encircling the flag announced the new building as the home of Holistic Healthcare.

Is the Creator having more fun at my expense? Julius couldn't believe his eyes. *Seminole! A healer from my tribe! Someone who would understand my plight! One of my own kind! Well, not completely, but he's a healer so he must also be Panther. There is none stronger, not even Braun!*

It was too much to hope there would be a true healer in this sleepy little town, but the evidence was there, plain as day. *How did he manage to get that past the town council? Does Braun know?* The thought of the bossy owner of the Panther Hollow Bed and Breakfast put a stop to his woolgathering and lit a fire under his feet.

"Shit. Braun is gonna have a fit if I'm late." Shaking a little at the prospect of a pissed-off Braun, he took off to get to work on time.

Julius almost fell through the employees-only entrance as the door flew open. Standing there, looking like he'd swallowed something sour, was Braun.

"You just made it, little bird. What kept you? I know you weren't detained in bed. I wasn't there and no one else has the nerve to approach that which I claim as mine."

"I don't belong to you, Braun. There are so many available men in your streak. Why are you always trying to lay claim to me?"

Braun's face broke out in a grin that reminded Julius of the Cheshire cat, all teeth and totally evil. "I'm the cat that wants the canary, little bird. So, it's your choice, me or no one."

He then turned to stare at the nearly completed new building. "I know you've been stalking that building since they first dug the foundation. Don't get your hopes up, little bird. No one wants you enough to come through me. He's a doctor, not a fighter."

The balloon of hope Julius held in his heart deflated a little. He'd seen the admiring glances of other men in the little village directed toward him in spite of his rough appearance. However, Braun always seemed to appear out of nowhere and suddenly the man would find interest in anything else and move on.

I just want somewhere to feel whole and belong. If this healer can help me, I can find somewhere else to live and hopefully build a life.

Braun grabbed Julius by the arm and pulled him inside the building. "You just make sure I know if he is in danger of discovering our secrets. We wouldn't want to upset the locals."

Julius started to speak out about his new discovery of the doctor's tribal affiliation, but inside his spirit one word rang out firm, loud, clear, and brooking no argument. *DON'T!* He knew that voice even though it had been years, and he obeyed.

As was his usual humiliating custom, Braun swung his hand to smack Julius on the backside. “Speaking of the locals, you need to get busy inside. We’ve got hungry mouths to feed.”

Julius jumped out of the way of the swat before it landed. Quickly, he donned his apron and began placing pitchers of cold water on each table. The sideboards were already set with pitchers of orange juice as well as urns full of coffee and hot water for tea.

Before long, brunch was over and Julius was scrubbing himself down in the shower. He’d managed to get his clothes done during breaks in dish loads.

He now bathed hastily so he’d be dry and dressed by the time Braun was done conversing with his guests. Julius didn’t like the lecherous coyote and did everything he could to avoid his unwanted advances. What he really hoped was that the arrival of the apparently Seminole healer would also mean the Creator had finally sent him the savior he had been asking for. He needed a place to really belong, and Panther Hollow couldn’t be it.

Especially as long as Braun Canis was around.

Healing Hands

Parker began to survey his new space. The diffusion of lavender permeating the lobby was meant to elicit a feeling of calm no matter how stressful the reason bringing the patient in. Next to the aroma emitted by the dying embers of the Corn Dance fires, this was his favorite and most comforting scent.

Everything was ready or would be once he completed work on the area he'd secretly constructed himself with the help of some of his tribal brothers.

The wing would serve those who could not take their ills to the local emergency room or urgent care. Ordinary doctors would not understand the strange metabolism or the unorthodox methods needed to facilitate the often rapid-fire healing that would take place. He knew they'd find the hidden door by scent and instinct alone, so he was only slightly surprised to discern the presence of a bird near the entrance so well hidden it was practically invisible. Cautiously, he eased himself through the concealed door and then let his senses lead him.

Curled up in the grass lay a person so slight it was difficult to tell if they were a man or a boy. Jet-black hair lay like a cape covering their face and shoulders and ended just above the waist of a pair of jeans that had truly seen better days.

As he approached, a shaky voice cried out, barely above a whisper, "Please. No more. I just can't."

Parker moved slowly toward the seemingly small figure, holding his hands out in front of him as if approaching a cornered animal. He inhaled

slightly before he spoke and was struck again by the scent emanating from the tiny creature. *Bird?*

“Don’t be afraid, little one,” he said, speaking as calmly and softly as he could. “I’m a doctor. I can help.” He dropped to his knees. “May I touch you? I won’t harm you, I promise.”

Slowly the hair fell away and revealed a bruised face. *Ah, so male, then!*

“Can you open your eyes? I want you to see that I’m not the person you’re afraid of.”

Slowly, the lids rose to reveal the most striking eyes—almond-shaped, steel gray, and were the pupils not so dilated, Parker imagined they would be piercing. The face was mature and there was just the slightest hint of the beginnings of beard growth. *So, not a boy, but an injured man.*

His right arm was misshapen, and Parker would bet the humerus was fractured.

“Are you able to stand? I’d like to take you into my clinic and help you.”

“If you just allow me to lie here, I will be fine soon.”

“I’m sure you will, but if you let me help you, you can heal in a place where you won’t need to be afraid of more injury. I have an area in my clinic where you can rest and I can look at your arm. It’s near impossible for a little bird to fly with one wing, yes?” Parker moved to the uninjured side of the man, who was now laying on his back. “I can carry you. My clinic is very close.” The man nodded and Parker carefully lifted him, surprised at how much heavier he was than he seemed.

With careful steps, Parker made his way to the back wall of his clinic and the cleverly concealed door. Once inside, he turned down a small hallway to a large room at its end. He lay the man on an exam table and began to gently examine his injured arm. Rounded gray eyes looked up at him from the table and Parker felt like he’d been shot through the heart.

The man’s hair fell onto his forehead in a vee shape. The tips of his hair were snow white and layered in such a way that were the locks not such a mess, Parker would have sworn it was a specialized cut-and-dye job. *He’s beautiful. Who would harm such a gorgeous creature?*

Then he recognized the species-specific scent emanating from the man. He’d known the man was a bird, but here inside the sterility of his

clinic he thought he could ascertain what type of bird and the knowledge hit him like a thunderbolt.

Owl? Damn you, Grandfather!

Strange. He could definitely scent owl, but not quite. Something else was there, trying to break through, and he could feel the battle in the man's spirit. As he struggled to unravel the puzzle before him, he could hear the voice of his grandfather, almost as if he were standing beside him. *Now is not the time, Parker. Be patient.*

Startled, he looked around to check and then, realizing that this was certain to look like odd behavior to the man laying before him, stopped. There would be time enough later for identification. Right now he had an injured man in front of him. The rest would come.

"My name is Dr. Dean and this is my clinic, but you can call me Parker if that makes you feel more comfortable."

"I'm Julius Grayson. I thought you were Braun back to finish the job." Julius moved to sit up but pain stopped him, causing him to cry out.

"Shhh, little bird. I think your arm is fractured. If you allow me to help you, I can put it in a better position for healing."

Parker realized he wasn't as prepared for this part of his practice as he thought. He was certain Julius could smell his panther. What he couldn't figure out was why, for some reason, Julius seemed reluctant to acknowledge that or at least give some indication he was aware this was not a typical human space.

"Julius, this is a safe place. It's self-contained and no one will discover you."

"Braun will and when he does, you may be sorry you decided to set up shop in this town."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it. In the meantime, let's get you sorted. If you shift, your arm will heal faster."

A look crossed Julius's face that Parker couldn't decipher. "I don't shift," he said. Then he spoke louder, firmer, brooking no argument. "I won't shift!"

"Whoa!" Parker said, holding up both hands. "Nobody's making you. I can set your arm so it heals properly. It'll just take longer." He walked to a small closet and got out casting materials. Julius refused the offered analgesic, so, working carefully to minimize the pain as much as possible, Parker realigned the limb and applied the cast.

Refusing the analgesic didn't make sense to Parker. He could tell from the odor on the man's clothing he had smoked something mind-altering in the recent past. *Maybe it's an issue of trust.*

"I'll clean up the rest of your wounds and give you a place to rest. Okay?"

He tried his best but he couldn't hold back the question any longer.

"Who did this to you?"

"Braun Canis. He's angry because I have refused to be his. This isn't the first time he's hurt me, but it is the first time he has left me so badly damaged. I think he's angrier because he blames you for me quitting."

"Me?" Parker was beyond shocked. He'd not yet met the bed and breakfast owner, so being targeted in such a way was confusing, to say the least. Something about Julius was bringing out every protective instinct he had. "Why me?"

Julius raised his head. Those eyes bored straight through Parker's soul. "I told him I was hoping to work for you in exchange for healing me."

Parker gently took Julius's face in his hands. "I tell you what. Let's get you settled and this arm healed. Then we'll talk about it."

Even as he gave Julius that half-baked answer, Parker had to admit that something about Julius brought out every protective instinct he had. He knew, if he had the opportunity, he'd never let anything or anybody hurt Julius again. Offering him a job in the clinic was the perfect way to see to it.

THE PANTHER, THE COYOTE, AND THE BIRD

The Panther

"It's no good. I'm not going to be satisfied until I find him." Parker ran his hand through his hair as he talked to his reflection in the mirror.

He'd gotten Julius settled in bed, made sure he understood how to use the call system, and then retired for the night. Much as he'd thought it would, the arm had already begun to heal and the "little bird," as he'd taken to calling Julius, would soon be able to fly off if he chose. Except, according to Julius's firm proclamation, he chose not to.

However, when he went to check on his charge the next morning, he'd found the bed empty except for a note that simply read, "Thanks." The man's behavior was confusing. Julius ran hot and cold simultaneously. On first blush, he seemed shaken and scared. One minute later, he was firmly establishing limits as he refused to shift to heal or accept analgesic medication.

After finding the note, Parker had cleaned the treatment area and went about his day, waiting for his patient to return for a checkup or at least to have the splinting removed. It was now seven days later, and Julius had yet to appear.

Parker placed both hands flat on the beautiful oak dresser that had been his since he was a teenager. He still couldn't believe his family had arranged to ship it to him. Head down, he closed his eyes and slowly began to concentrate.

Grandfather, what on earth do I do? I feel the wounds in his psyche. I can repair the damage to his body, but I just don't know how to heal such a

confused spirit. I can't discern exactly what he is and he doesn't seem to know.

Deep in his soul, in a place rarely touched except by the purification rituals of the Corn Dance, there was a stirring.

Then, a voice he recognized but hadn't heard in some time, came to him. It was loving, like a mother soothing a child, while simultaneously firm and instructing.

My firstborn. You are the base of the totem. Be what you were created for. Everything you need is with you.

Slowly, Parker emerged from that deep place and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw, lying in the place he'd put them when he first moved in, were the small box and the colorful pouch given to him by his mother and grandfather.

Parker smiled and whispered a word of thanks. "Perfect!" He knew exactly what to do. He just had to find and convince a certain little bird.

THE COYOTE

Braun Canis stood on the porch of the Panther Hollow Bed and Breakfast and stared at the now open-for-business clinic. He would have bet money the town council would have voted against the place. Panther Hollow had a population of twenty-five hundred and was a place historically intolerant of diversity in its ranks.

His own inquisition at his application to create the bed and breakfast had lasted a month, and he was only approved because the appeal of having a French chef preparing meals would help increase tourist travel and stimulate the flagging economy.

When he'd settled in The Hollow, as it was affectionately called by its residents, it had had everything it needed: hospital/pharmacy, mercantile/dry goods store, bar/liquor store, restaurant, post office, schools, and, of course, the requisite two churches.

Now the children had become adults who spoke French, ate organic everything, and suddenly needed holistic medicine with its patches, powders, teas, and aromatherapy.

“Well, he can have the town, but Julius is mine.” He grimaced as he thought of his last attempt to convince the little bird of the best way to “feather his nest.” He knew he’d gone a bit far and he was sorry, but for such a timid-looking little creature, Julius wasn’t very submissive. He’d fought back and continued to refuse Braun’s demands.

For the longest time, Braun had been the only one in town to give a job to Julius and that had kept him within reach. He could not—no, *he would not*—allow this new influence to disrupt all his hard work. Not when he was finally so close. The beating had been severe, true, but for the first time, Julius had curled into a ball, pleaded for mercy, and was on the verge of giving in when they were interrupted.

The new doctor had appeared out of nowhere. He was at least six feet tall, with bronze skin and long black hair that flowed in waves below his shoulders. Braun thought he could smell a type of cat, but as quickly as the odor assailed his nostrils, a sudden strong wind blew the scent away.

Unsure of what was happening, Braun had moved away, deeper into the surrounding bush and downwind of the approaching man, where he could observe unseen.

He had held his breath, amazed as Julius let the doctor lift him and carry him through a concealed door. The doctor had cradled the shaking man like he was something precious. *Oh, that won’t do at all,* Braun had thought. *He’s mine!*

“I don’t care what kind of cat you are,” Braun now said in the direction of the clinic building. “Julius *is* mine. I will have him and send your feline ass back to the swamps where you belong.”

He took a deep drink from the coffee cup in his hand, the black brew’d long gone cold. It was almost as cold as the strange wind that seemed to envelop him for the second time in a week. This time it carried with it a chilling and foreboding voice that he could not only hear, he could also feel like a knife in his heart.

Touch not my anointed!!! YOU will do my chosen no harm!

THE BIRD

“Dakota! I just need you to help me get this damn thing off so my arm is free again!” Julius was beyond frustrated. His skin was starting to itch beneath the offending wrappings, but he couldn’t understand what was making them so hard to remove.

Dakota looked over the splinting and shook his head. “Didn’t you say this doc was Seminole? You know their medicine men have strong magic. Why don’t you just go back to him and have it removed? Frankly, I don’t know why you didn’t just stay there in the first place.”

One week ago, Julius had waited quietly, faking sleep until he heard Parker close the door leading to his apartment upstairs. Carefully, he’d eased out of the bed and through the door that led to the forest. He’d hastily written a note of thanks and hoped the man would understand.

Now he was beginning to reconsider his decisions. He’d run away because he didn’t want to cause trouble by bringing Braun to the clinic’s door.

Braun had proven to him how far he was willing to go to get what he wanted. The pain had been so intense that Julius was about to relent just to make it stop when Dr. Dean had shown up in the nick of time. What was strange was Braun’s response. He’d retreated into the bush instead of facing down the doctor, and he’d stayed hidden, allowing Parker to carry Julius into the clinic to treat his injuries.

Dakota had a point. In retrospect, something kept Braun from interfering when the doctor approached and carried him inside. He may have been safer in the clinic all along.

“Look, Dakota, you’re right, but the fact is, I can’t think straight with this thing on my arm. Are you sure you can’t find the way to remove it?”

Dakota shook his head. If Julius didn’t know better, he’d think his friend was enjoying this moment.

“Julius, you’ve spent every day of your life since I met you begging this Creator entity to heal you. I’ve listened to you intently and I still have no idea what you need healing from. When that clinic went up, you were beside yourself with hope. When we found out the new doctor was a Seminole healer, I thought you were going to go find a virgin to sacrifice to your Creator in thanks.”

Julius became indignant. “The Creator doesn’t require sacrifice. Where do you get this stuff?”

“Simmer, man. I’m joking. Seriously though, you need to find your way back to that clinic. Let the good doctor remove that splint thing and while you’re at it, start the conversation you’ve been dying to have about this healing you need.”

Julius knew his friend was right. This was the opportunity he’d been praying for. *Maybe I’m just meant to be this way forever—alone, clanless, nobody to love me just as I am. I wouldn’t mind much if Braun would just leave me alone. It just figures that the only person interested in me is more evil than the very darkness I’m working so hard to avoid. The thing is, who am I to deserve help, and why should it happen for me?*

Suddenly, it was as if the earth stood still, and Julius, embraced by warmth, heard a voice of care and kindness.

You are mine, Julius Grayson, and it should happen because I desire it for you.

ONE WING

The best thing about Dakota's cave was it stayed dark in the deeper recesses until a lamp was lit. Of course, the entrance lit up immediately at sunrise. It was a beauty Julius had come to appreciate during his brief stay.

"Good morning. I'm glad to see you're awake!" Dakota was in an unusually cheerful mood. Usually, he wasn't known to be an early riser and he generally greeted sunrise like a bear with a hangnail, all grump and grouch until he'd had his first cup of coffee.

Speaking of coffee. Was that a coffee cup in Dakota's hand? It sure smelled like it, but the little camp stove he'd fashioned out of a grate over rocks was cold.

"Where the hell have you been already and coming back with coffee, no less?" Julius sniffed in the direction of his friend. "You've had a bath at the waterfall! You hate that water! You always say it's brackish!"

"Guilty on all counts," said Dakota. "I had a very important errand to run and I wanted to get back here before you awoke." He pulled the bedding off Julius. "Get up! We have company."

"You never have company. Well, except for me. Where is this company?"

Dakota walked back to the mouth of his cave. "Come on in!" he called out. "Actually, Julius, I don't have company, but you do."

As he spoke, the light in the mouth of the cave was suddenly blocked by the six-foot presence of Dr. Parker Dean carrying a large black leather backpack by its top handle.

He smiled as he approached Julius and handed him a thermos. “I was told someone here required my assistance.” He kneeled in the dirt and gently took Julius’ splinted arm in his hands. “Dakota knocked on my door this morning saying he was seeking medical attention for a bird trying to fly on one wing.” He locked eyes with Julius. “That wouldn’t be you, would it?”

Those eyes! I wonder how much he really sees. Julius suddenly felt like he could burst into white-hot flames. He tried to look away, but he was frozen in place. Suddenly, his arm was free of their wrappings and good as new.

“There you go! Good as new.” Parker smiled as he cleaned up the dressing detritus. “Now, according to your cave-mate here, you have other issues as well.”

Unsettled, Julius shook his head slightly. The last thing he remembered was staring into Parker’s eyes, unable to move as he waited for the splinting to be removed.

What happened? Did I fall asleep?

“Uh, um, thank you,” he stammered. “I, I, I don’t know what to say. This is embarrassing but I seem to have zoned out.”

Dakota appeared out of nowhere, startling Julius. “Look! This man is the real deal. If you don’t tell him what’s going on, I will.” He moved so that he was directly in front of Julius, momentarily blocking his sight line to Parker. “Dude, you can’t keep hiding and there is literally nowhere to run unless you move to Canada. Even that not work. The truth will make you free, my brother.”

Julius shifted into a cross-legged sitting position. He made a pad out of his blanket and, indicating it, offered Parker a place to sit. Dakota completed the circle, sitting himself between the two men, and Julius began his tale.

“I am Seminole, but I am also clanless. My father is a descendant of the extinct Owl clan, and I don’t know what my mother is. She left my father and me when I was four. My father and I moved around a lot. Eventually, we came to live among a strange group of men who claimed to also be of the extinct Owl clan, so they too were unaffiliated. By the time I was a teenager, my father was always missing at night with his new friends.”

Tears began to slide down Julius's face as he spoke. *Now for the hard part.* "One night, I followed my father deep into a wooded area. There, he and his friends began some weird chant, after which they went into an old hut. When it was all over, there were four large owls holding small, glowing sacks in their beaks. They flew high into the trees and then flew away. I don't know where they went all night. The next morning, I confronted my father. He mistook my questions for acceptance. When I explained that I had no desire to participate in whatever dark magic he and his friends were involved in, he became angry and gave me an ultimatum. I was to accept my destiny or get out of his house. Needless to say, I left."

Dakota moved closer to Julius and put an arm around his shoulder. It felt comforting, and Julius couldn't help wishing the arm belonged to the handsome healer. *Damn! Where'd that come from?*

"It sounds like you had a rough start, Julius, but I'm failing to see how I can help or, for that matter, what I can help *with*."

"I'm almost there," said Julius. "I wandered around for a while doing day work, sleeping in shelters when I could find room. One day I helped an older woman carry her groceries to her car. She explained that she was a seer and that the Creator told her to take me in. I found that strange, but I'd not had a safe place to sleep in three days and a warm bed sounded good. Once we got to her house, she made tea and we talked. She explained to me the legends of clan creation and the extinction of the Owl clan. Finally, she explained my ability to resist the pull of my father's dark magic had to be attributed to my mother."

Julius moved to kneel in front of Parker. "She said a true Seminole healer could help me unify my spirit and set me free from the pull of my father's bloodline. I don't mind being without a clan, but I do want to have a life free from this division, one that doesn't include working for creeps like Braun."

The mention of Braun seemed to get Parker's attention. "What does Braun have to do with this? Other than his desire for a certain handsome man, that is."

"Braun knows my story. He tried to convince me to shift because he believes in the strength of the dark magic. He doesn't want me as a partner, he wants me as a slave to his desires and aspirations."

"Have you ever shifted?" Parker asked. "I must say, I can tell you are something avian, but I don't get distinct owl sensations. It could be as

simple as your mother isn’t Owl. According to tribal law, she shouldn’t be. That would be mean your father married a woman who was essentially his sister. I don’t know much about the Owl clan, but I do know even they didn’t breach that rule. Interclan marriage is strictly forbidden.”

Parker stood, then held out a hand to help Julius up as well. “I think I can help you. There is a purification ritual usually associated with the Corn Dance. If you’re willing, we can perform it tonight.” He turned to Dakota. “We will need a third person. Would you be willing to join us and take part?”

Dakota stood, dusting off his pants with his hands. “Anything to help my friend. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

The three men agreed to meet in the clearing behind the clinic at dusk, then Parker left to make the necessary preparations.

CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART

Preparation

Parker had a lot of work to do to have a sweat lodge ready by dusk. It was almost noon and even a small structure could take hours to properly build. *I wish Grandfather were here. This is so important, and the presence of a true bundle carrier would create a stronger atmosphere. Creator, please be with me tonight. I am but a young vessel. You are the power that will bring healing and truth to Julius.*

Walking back from Dakota's cave, he decided to enter the clinic through the rear door so as not to appear open for business. Besides, everything he would need was in the woods surrounding the clearing he'd created earlier for this very purpose. The branches he'd gathered and prepared should be just enough for a small lodge.

He broke through the bush, expecting to see an empty clearing and unprepared for the surprise awaiting him. The framework of a sweat lodge stood in the exact space he'd planned to build it. The greater surprise was Nathan Dean covering the structure with blankets. "Don't just stand there staring," he said. "There's a lot to do and we're burning daylight."

Parker was both stunned and overjoyed beyond belief. His grandfather had to have left home two days ago. Moreover, he must have arrived just as Parker left with Dakota to have gotten this much work done. He knew his grandfather began and ended each day in meditation and prayer, often emerging from his quiet place bearing supernatural knowledge. He was, after all, the bundle carrier, the most powerful healer in his tribe.

He ran to Nathan and hugged him tightly. "I have never been happier for your gift than I am today."

“This is going to be a long night, Parker. But when it is over, your friend will be a new man if that is what he desires.”

“I would ask how you know, but I’ve seen you in action too many times. I hope one day my connection to the Creator will be as strong.”

“It will be as strong as you work to make it. Now, let’s get busy. There is still much to do.”

For the remainder of the afternoon, the two men worked in companionable silence. As the day began to turn to dusk, they stood shirtless just outside the ceremonial space.

At the center was the building where the purification ritual would begin. Just outside lay a campfire. The flames were burning white hot, heating the smooth river rocks that lay in its depths and waited to be passed through the small passageway into a pit inside.

Surrounding the space were four logs facing North, South, East and West, each bearing a small fire.

Dakota and Julius entered the clearing. Like Parker had done so many hours earlier, Julius stopped, his mouth wide open. He appeared stunned to the core. Dakota too seemed overcome by the scene in front of them. *I guess this wasn’t what they were expecting*, Parker thought as he and Nathan solemnly approached the two men. He quickly introduced them to Nathan, who immediately pulled Julius aside to talk to him.

For his part, Parker walked Dakota over to the burning fire and explained to him how to carefully pass the heated rock into the otherwise sealed room. He had Dakota practice with a cold river rock and the special tongs Nathan had brought with him. Dakota was a natural and proved himself more than capable of completing this task when required.

PURIFICATION

Nathan, Parker, and Julius entered the lodge and arranged themselves around the pit where Dakota had placed a white-hot river rock. Julius watched transfixed as Nathan slowly sprinkled water from a bowl at his side over the heated stone, causing hot steam to rise and engulf the three men.

In a rhythmic voice, Nathan led Parker and Julius through the ritual as copious amounts of sweat formed and poured off their bodies in the steam-filled, extremely hot, pitch-black room. Julius felt Parker touch him, assuring he was close enough to know if Julius became overcome by the high temperatures and fainted. Nathan had explained the necessity of this in their talk before entering the lodge.

Slowly, the world around him narrowed down to the sound of Nathan's voice and the bottle of peyote tea being passed from man to man.

Julius discerned a shift in the timbre of Nathan's speech. He had no idea how much time had passed, only that there was less steam in the room and Nathan was leading him by the hand out of the lodge and in through the forest-side door of the clinic.

The room inside was dark and felt comparatively cool. Nathan had Julius sit on a mat and handed him another cup of peyote tea. It was the worst thing Julius had ever tasted, but something inside his soul was soothed by the bitterness of the herbal blend, causing him to sink even deeper into the place where only he and the Creator would exist. So, he sipped the tea and paid strict attention to the wise words being imparted to him by Nathan.

When the ceremony ended, Julius felt strong, clearheaded, and full of purpose. He listened intently as Nathan explained what to expect when he left the building.

As Julius stepped into the clearing, he was bathed in the natural light of the night. Never had the moon and stars seemed so bright before and, if asked, he would swear a moonbeam encircled him alone.

Dakota lay in the soft grass alongside the darkened remains of the campfire and appeared to be asleep. He looked almost as peaceful as Julius felt so, instead of waking his friend, he walked softly past him and continued into the woods.

Julius received the clarity he sought. He felt clean, whole, and more than ready to step out on faith empowered by the beauty of the past hours.

As he strode toward Dakota's cave, the place where he'd been hiding until this moment in time, he heard the only voice that could match the tone of his joy.

Fly, my son. Fly!

EPILOGUE

Redemption

Parker stood on the porch in the front of his clinic. He loved the weather-worn design of the wooden structure that wrapped around the front and sides of his building. It connected to the porch of the building on his right, creating a boardwalk effect as each of the buildings on this row continued to link to one to the other.

He gave a nod to Mr. Caruthers, the landscaper who ensured his shrubs were neatly trimmed.

Like he'd done every day for the past month, he kept watch, waiting for Julius to return. His grandfather told him the purification ritual had been successful and warned him that it may be awhile before he saw Julius again.

"He's a man released from the dankest of prisons. There is nothing more incapacitating than what we believe."

Julius had grown up believing he was inherently bad, then spent his adult life resisting the persistent enticement of an evil not of his own making. Now he knew the truth. He was free and, like any freed man, was about the business of exploring his new world.

Good luck, Julius. I pray the joy I saw on your face that night stays with you for eternity.

Parker walked around to the clearing in the back of the clinic where he spotted Dakota strolling toward him. Dakota had not participated in the sweat lodge, but when he awakened the next morning, he too seemed renewed.

“Hey,” Dakota called out in greeting. “Have you heard from Julius yet?” He put his hands in his pockets and kicked at a small rock sitting in the dirt. “I was kind of hoping he would have at least sent a postcard by now.”

Parker shrugged his shoulders with his hands held out in front of him. “If you don’t know where he is, I can’t imagine who would. Unless…” He hesitated, dreading what he was thinking. “You don’t think Braun got his hands on him, do you?”

“No!” replied a voice that was more growl than anything else. “Braun doesn’t have him. If he had, would I be standing here looking for him?”

Both men turned to see Braun in all his pissed-off glory standing at the base of the stairs.

“Always speak of yourself in the third person?” Dakota asked in a slow drawl.

Braun moved close to Parker. “I’m not in the mood for ignorance today. I’m trying to find out why Julius has missed work for an entire month. Surely, he’s well enough to be discharged from your little clinic by now.”

Parker couldn’t believe his ears. “You think Julius is here? I guess you missed the part of the conversation where I said I was wondering where he was.”

Parker paused a moment then cocked his head to one side and squinted his eyes and he looked pointedly at Braun. “Didn’t Julius quit working for you? Why would someone show up for a job if they resigned?

“Listen, I’m not in the mood for a cunning cat! I came to get what’s mine. Now where is he?”

Parker let out a slight smirk. “He’s finally out of your reach. You’ll just have to find yourself a new punching bag.”

“You applying for the job?” Braun’s words sounded brave, but his body spoke a different language. “I don’t care what kind of healer you are. You’re not needed here. Everything was fine before you arrived.”

Dakota barked out a laugh. “Fine for whom? You?” He moved to stand next to Parker “Julius is healed and out of your lying clutches, coyote. Even when he returns, I think you’ll find your days of torturing him are over.”

“MINE!” Braun yelled, then shifted.

Parker looked at the animal standing before him. Braun was bigger than the average coyote and muscular, unlike his scrawnier non-shifter cousins. It also surprised him that Braun seemed to be a loner—again, unlike the natural habits of the animal.

He was about to shift, meet this creature head-to-head and finish this argument once and for all, when a strong voice inside him commanded, *NO!*

Confused, but not about to disobey the Creator, Parker commanded his animal to retreat and remained in his human form.

At that moment, a loud squawk was heard from overhead and the biggest eagle Parker had ever seen swooped down and grabbed the shifted Braun by the scruff of the neck with its claw. Without stopping, it carried Braun off into the woods.

Parker and Dakota stood speechless as they watched the two figures disappear. Dakota was the first to break the silence.

“Did you see that? What? How?”

Parker smiled. “I think Julius is about to return.”

“Dude. Did you see that bird? That was no owl!”

Parker turned to Dakota. “Neither was Julius.” He put up one hand to stop Dakota’s protest. “I know about his father, but Julius inherited the clan traits of his mother. That’s our way.” He turned to walk toward the clinic back door, which opened as he approached. “The Creator sent my grandfather for Julius’s purification ritual. When all the grime is gone, the light of the truth shines through. Julius’s resistance to his father’s evil ways was because of his mother’s spirit. Braun was confused as well.” He looked up at the sky one more time before entering the clinic with Dakota close behind. “Well, I’m guessing his confusion is about to be all cleared up.”

That evening, as Parker and Dakota were locking up the clinic, there was a knock at the front door. Parker opened the door to find Julius standing on the porch, looking like new money. He seemed taller, more muscular, and his clothing was spotless. Even his hair shined brightly as the soft winds blew through it. He looked healthy all over.

“Ya gonna leave me standing on the doorstep?” Julius said grinning as he eased his way past Parker. “I hear tell you’re looking for some help around here for when you have special patients.” He made air quotes as he said *special*.

Parker and Dakota grabbed him at the same time, and the hugging and crying seemed to go on forever.

Finally, Parker spoke. “You look amazing! I guess I can’t call you little bird anymore.”

“No,” Julius said laughing, “And if you call me Big Bird, I’m going to slap you!”

Dakota clapped Julius on the back. “I can’t believe how wonderful you look. Dude, I’m so glad you’re back.”

For his part, Julius continued lock eyes with Parker. “I have so much to thank you and Nathan for. Before the ritual, I asked him what would happen. I didn’t understand him then, but I do now.”

“My grandfather can be cryptic sometimes. What did he say?”

Julius looked up slightly to the ceiling as he quoted Nathan’s words, even taking on the older man’s cadence. “*You will learn and know the truth and the truth will make you free*.”

“And are you?” asked Dakota.

Julius stretched. His eyes seeming to sparkle as they were hit by a ray of light from the setting sun coming through the nearby window.

“Oh yes,” he said. “Free as a bird.”

About the Authors

About Atoine Bandele

Antoine lives in Los Angeles, CA with his life partner and cat.

He is a YouTuber, producing work for his own channel, which mostly covers *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

He is also an audiobook engineer.

Whenever he has the time, he's writing books inspired by African folklore, mythology, and history.

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About JB Caine

JB Caine has been writing and creating stories for as long as she can remember. Even as a child, words were her favorite playmates and her first love. This relationship led her to a 30-year career as a high school English, Creative Writing, and Speech/Debate teacher. Since 2019, she has rededicated herself to writing as a craft and a career, and has decided to follow her lifelong dream of being a professional novelist.

Her fascination with the mysterious and unknown has been ever-present. Her earliest memories of reading included books about the Loch Ness Monster and other cryptids, the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Greece, and fantastical stories of magic and the paranormal.

JB Caine lives in Wesley Chapel, Florida with her beloved husband and a daughter who is the sunshine of her existence.

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ABOUT KILLIAN WOLF

Killian Wolf is a Miami, Florida, native who enjoys pirates, rum, and skulls as much as she loves writing about dark magick and sorcerers. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Cultural Anthropology and Sociology and a Master of Science in Environmental Archaeology and Palaeoeconomy.

Killian writes books about obtaining magickal powers and stepping into other dimensions. She lives in Florida with her husband, a tornado of a cat, and the most timid snake you'd ever meet. When she isn't writing, you might find her at an archaeological dig, rock climbing, or sipping on dark spiced rum while working on a painting.

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ABOUT KRYS FENNER

Krys Fenner, also known as **Brigit Rosé**—like the wine, not the flower—has been infinitely passionate about writing and helping people for as long as she can remember. Having already published several books, she avidly works on multiple series, from social issues to paranormal romance. Though she recently discovered the joy of co-authoring the Prisma Isle Series, she could never deny her first love—YA. Krys received an Associate of Arts in Psychology, a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing, and a Master's degree in Creative Writing. When she isn't writing, crafting, or baking, she's spending time with her three fur babies, Bones, Luna, and Lola. To learn more about her upcoming book releases, visit her at kbfennerrose.com.

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ABOUT ERIN CASEY

Erin Casey (she/her) is an urban fantasy writer and author of The Purple Door District series. She's a Founder of The Writers' Rooms, a literary non-profit corporation that focuses on providing a free, safe environment to all writers no matter their income, skillset, race, and gender. Within the organization, she leads a fantasy/sci-fi group called The Violet Realm which meets twice a month. An advocate for mental health, she openly talks about her struggles with depression/anxiety/ADHD/CPTSD/eating disorder on her social media platforms and supports the LGBTQIA+ community. She firmly believes in supporting fellow authors be it through offering writing lessons in the Violet Realm, literary tips in her blog and on social media, or providing encouragement to those seeking to find their creative voice. And, of course, she's a devoted bird mom to six feathered kids. To learn more about her and her books, visit erincasey.org.

ABOUT ALICE HANOV

Alice Hanov has been dreaming up stories since she was seven, only recently deciding to commit them to paper after enthralling her children for years with wild tales of sorcerers and fearless girls who take on the world. Alice is the author of the novel The Head, the Heart, and the Heir and its prequel short story collection The Spare Who Became the Heir and Other Stories with many more books planned in the series. She graduated from the University of Waterloo with a degree in rhetoric and professional writing. When she's not writing or reading, Alice runs a software company or can be found painting, knitting, and chasing after her super busy artistic children. Alice lives in Ontario with her husband of over fifteen years and their three kids.Alice Hanov has been dreaming up stories since she was seven, only recently deciding to commit them to paper after enthralling her children for years with wild tales of sorcerers and fearless girls who take on the world. Alice is the author of the novel The Head, the Heart, and the Heir and its prequel short story collection The Spare Who Became the Heir and Other Stories with many more books planned in the series. She graduated from the University of Waterloo with a degree in rhetoric and professional writing. When she's not writing or reading, Alice runs a software company or can be found painting, knitting, and chasing after her super busy artistic children. Alice lives in Ontario with her husband of over fifteen years and their three kids.

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ABOUT NIKKI BROOKE

Nikki Brooke is a science fiction & fantasy author and scriptwriter from Australia who champions bisexual representation in books and film. She's a self-proclaimed geek, loving

science fiction, fantasy, history, and mythology, and is proud of it—which is probably obvious given the genres she writes, plus, she named her dogs Osiris and Apollo after ancient gods. Her debut novel, Plagued Lands, is due for release in 2024 and has been chosen by Undisputed Films for adaptation into a feature film. Nikki's writing has earned accolades, including finalist in the 7th Annual Launch Pad Prose Competition and semi-finalist in the ScreenCraft Cinematic Book Competition. Several of her short stories have found homes in anthologies from various publishers.

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Catrina lives in Austin, TX with her family. A creative at heart with a stable office job, writing is her escape. Ever since picking up the habit of putting words to her daydreams, she's written stories with a hint of romance (some steamier than others, so beware). If you love monsters who are secret softies and a touch of magic, read on.

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C.J. Piperata began her journey as an illustrator, designer and musician in Brooklyn, NY, and attended the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. As an illustration student, she discovered and fell in love with the world of epic fantasy, and as a songwriter, she had a knack for crafting tales to music in under four minutes. She made the leap to written word in 2019, and began working on an epic fantasy novel series in the fall of 2020 which is anticipated for release in 2024.

When she's not writing, you can find her channeling inspiration by working on visual art, or behind an instrument writing and performing music.

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ABOUT ELIZABETH MERWIN

Elizabeth Merwin was born into a military family in Madrid, Spain, and spent her childhood learning about other cultures whenever her family moved. She holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in Russian Area Studies and Spanish, a Master of Arts in Logistics and Transportation Management, and a Doctorate in Executive Leadership. She studied Spanish, Russian, and Dari, and picked up pieces of other languages throughout her travels.

Elizabeth retired from the Florida National Guard after a twenty-one-year Army career in which she served in all components of the Army. She embarked on her writing journey after retirement and is currently working on a middle-grade and epic fantasy series.

Her parents introduced her and her siblings to fantasy at an early age and the seed was planted. She gains inspiration for stories through travel and while walking her dog (and cat) along the Spanish Oak lined streets of her hometown in Florida.

ABOUT MISKI HARRIS

Miski Harris is a stubborn native New Yorker and a veteran who raised five sons while traveling the world. Today she resides in Prince Georges County, Maryland, with her two precocious cats, Freddie and Marshall.

Her two lifelong constants have been her faith and her love of books. Reading and writing are her mainstays, and she is rarely seen without her Nook, which currently holds over 2,000 books, or a notebook where she jots ideas.

When Miski sets her mind to something, she’s a passionate advocate for what she believes in who’s not afraid to go after her goals.

Her first M/M romance novel was written after a close friend challenged her to join the National Novel Writing Month initiative.

Several years and many published works later, she primarily writes fade-to-black/closed-door romance with delicious angst, sweet but broken main characters, and the type of love that knows no boundaries. This formula makes for enticing contemporary stories and engaging tales where she ventures into the magical worlds of urban fantasy, shifters, and the supernatural.

Miski believes challenge defines worlds to conquer and lines to cross, love and faith are the most powerful forces in the universe, and the only thing hindering success is a failure to try. She invites you to join her in a world where love is second to nothing and life is the greatest adventure of all.

You can find more about Miski and her books at: miskiharris.com

If you are on Facebook, she posts about events and new releases at: facebook.com/miski.harris

Her Facebook reader group has sneak peeks, visits by guest authors, and other fun stuff.

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